No. 770.
Week ending
October 3rd,
1903.

SHORT STORIES

PRICE
1D.

THE MAN SLIPPED AND FELL. THE GIRL HE LOVED POUNCED UPON HIM WITH A SHRIEK OF TRIUMPH, AND COILED THE THICK TRESSES OF HER HAIR ROUND HIS THROAT. *See story inside.*

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SHORT STORIES

No. 770.] [ONE PENNY.

For the Week Ending October 3rd, 1903.

The Girl in the Next House.

The Thrilling Story of a Misplaced Love.

Containing the Incident Depicted on the Cover.

I SUPPOSE I ought to have been delighted when Uncle Gregory offered to have me as an inmate, giving me my board and lodging for nothing, and, as he told my mother, "See to the young cub's manners and morals."

My parent was charmed with the plan, it had so much in her eyes to recommend it; economy, companionship of the proper kind for me, and a certain scarce-to-be-breathed hope that Uncle's wealth would, in the due course of things, be mine.

As a clerk in an insurance office, with shadowy prospects, I did not feel justified in declining so handsome (Uncle Gregory's word, not mine) an offer, therefore with a sigh I bade farewell to the boarding-house at Brixton, where we had musical evenings, and where I had been instructed in the mysteries of ping-pong by a skittish young thing of a governess, and betook myself to Uncle Gregory's large and gloomy abode that was situated on the Hackney Downs.

My relative greeted me in a chilly fashion, and expressed a hope that I should apply myself to my work and not be out late at night.

"I don't know many people in London," I observed meekly, "so I don't go out much."

"Excellent thing for you that you don't," he retorted sharply. "Now listen to me, Paul. I give you a home here because I am anxious to save your mother's pocket, and also because a young man of your age (you're three-and-twenty, aren't you?) is exposed to temptations when he lives alone or in a boarding-house. I should have suggested this plan of mine when you first came to town four months ago, but I have been ill; I am only just recovering my usual health, so you will kindly remember not to go shouting and whistling about the house; it would drive me mad. The housekeeper, Mrs. Burgess, will look after your things, and you are not to give her or the maids any trouble. I know what young men are, and I hope to train you to be something different."

I felt inclined to suggest that he had far better leave me alone, that the task of transforming me into an elderly lady, for instance, was surely beyond even his talents; but I was wisely silent, and he dismissed me with the observation that we dined at half-past seven and that it would strike that hour almost immediately.

My uncle's house was large, gloomy, and of most unattractive appearance, but it rejoiced in a beautiful garden, and thither I was thankful to escape after a solemn meal, in which the great feature was the enormous quantity of china and plate and the small amount of food.

The moon was silvering the pear-tree tops and there was a high wall separating my uncle's domain from his next-door neighbour's, but though everything combined to make me feel like Romeo there was no Juliet in the case. I sucked at my pipe, and felt very sentimental; I tried to sigh over the recollection of that arch little governess at Brixton, who must have been almost old enough to be my mother, but the sigh was but an artificial one. I gazed at the solemn moon and wondered vaguely whether—supposing I fell in love—Uncle Gregory would let me promenade in his garden with the lady of my heart? I doubted it. My uncle had sustained in his youth what is known as a "disappointment," and it had had the effect upon him of making him object to all female society, except that of his phenomenally ugly housekeeper and two equally unattractive maids.

The air was wonderfully still, a faint and faraway roar of traffic sounded like the distant thunder of the ocean; it seemed incredible that London lay so near. Certainly this garden with the serene hush that brooded over it, was an improvement on my Brixton boarding-house. I was just congratulating myself upon the change, when a strange sound reached my ears. I stood motionless, listening. It seemed to come from the other side of the wall, my neighbour's garden. Again and again it was repeated; there could be no doubt about it, someone, man, woman, or child, was sobbing in heartbroken fashion within a few yards of me.

Sympathy, combined with that desire for investigation that our enemies call idle curiosity, drove me to attempt to discover who was there, bewailing their lot, and I safely scrambled to the summit of the wall, which I was devoutly thankful was not garnished with protecting broken glass bottles. Seated firmly thereon—a conspicuous object I felt in the brilliant moonlight—I looked eagerly into the adjoining garden and beheld a vision that I at first took to be a ghost. If all spooks resembled the one upon which my gaze was now fixed, I marvelled that everyone was not a member of the Psychical Research Society.

The ghost was a girl, all in white, with the most beautiful golden hair imaginable, flowing past her knees; she was standing just below me, looking up with eyes dark and

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beseeching, and glorious as the eyes of a stag. It was as clear as though it had been midday; I saw every feature in that perfect face. How long we gazed at one another I could not say. I sat there feeling as stupid as an owl. I longed to say something, but I could think of no fitting phrase with which to open the conversation. I was in every sense of the word in an awkward position. My lovely companion spoke first.

"Have you come to help me?" she asked in a voice that was scarce above a whisper; "oh, say you have."

"Help you?" I echoed, hardly able to get the words out, so excited was I. "How, when, now? What can I do for you? Only tell me?"

She pressed her little hands together, and I saw tears in the great eyes gazing up at me, a sight that so moved me that I nearly overbalanced in my distress.

"It is asking too much of you," she whispered, "but I am in great, in deadly peril, and—unless I am rescued—promise me"—she broke off suddenly—"that you will tell no one about me—that you will not mention to a living soul that you have seen me or spoken to me—promise—or I shall suffer cruelly, if it be known that I have dared to complain of my miserable lot, that I have tried to find a friend."

"Of course, I promise," I protested eagerly, "not a word concerning you shall pass my lips. I swear it."

"Thank you"—she smiled as she spoke, and shook back the heavy waves of her wonderful hair—"I see you are to be trusted, then take me away—take me away—before—before he kills me!"

She was close beneath me now, and by leaning over I could have grasped the hands she raised imploringly to me, but as I feared to topple over I dared not risk such a proceeding.

"Who will kill you?" I asked in alarm, "no one surely would hurt you, how could they?" I grew warm as I looked into her exquisite face. "Why, they must be perfect brutes if they don't worship you."

"You don't understand—I am in the way," she answered sadly. "I am a prisoner; oh, if you will only help me—I will never, never forget it. I shall be your debtor for ever. Help me to escape—to get away into safety; you don't know what it is to live in constant fear of your life—never to be sure from one hour to another what is going to happen to you. I have contrived to escape to-night, but what is the use? I can't get over this wall—every gate is locked."

"Why don't you call for help?" I asked; "shriek as loud as you can, you'd attract someone's attention."

She shuddered and cowered down. "You don't understand," she answered hoarsely, "he would—oh, my God—listen!"

A deep, bell-like sound rang through the night air; it was the musical discord, the sweet thunder that can never be mistaken for anything else—it was the bay of a bloodhound. The girl crouched for an instant, listening to it, then gathered herself up with a cry, and fled across the lawn to the house. The beautiful notes came nearer. I started—in so doing, I overbalanced myself, and fell backward into the soft garden mould, snapping in my swift descent several branches off the espalier pear-tree.

For a few minutes I lay upon the ground, half-stunned; all was silent again, and as I sprawled foolishly amongst the sweet-scented tobacco flowers, it occurred to me that it had been a distinctly fortunate thing for me that I had fallen into my uncle's garden and not into his neighbour's, whose dog by this time might be making a meal of me.

I picked myself up, and after having ascertained that no bones were broken, I again with much caution clambered up the pear-tree and peeped over the wall. The moonlight was here, and the soft black shadows cast athwart it by the house, but of living being there was no sign. I slid abruptly down again, convinced in my mind of several things. Firstly, that I had fallen madly in love at first sight; secondly, that the "he" to whom the mysterious fair one had alluded must be a fiend incarnate if he kept a bloodhound to terrify her; and thirdly, that I would make as good a show as I could in endeavouring to rescue her.

And all that night my dreams were disturbed by visions of glorious red-haired angels, pursued by bloodhounds from out whose mighty jaws there belched forth fire and smoke, urged on by hideous giants to annihilate beauty in distress.

It was the following evening, when my uncle and I were discussing our modest dessert of shrivelled walnuts and strawberries of dubious freshness, when I put the above question; "Uncle Gregory, who lives next door?"

My relative looked at me with eyes that glowed angrily beneath his rugged brows.

"Why do you wish to know?" he asked coldly; "my neighbour and I are not on terms of intimacy."

"I thought perhaps you might know the name of the man who has the bloodhound," I said boldly, though I confess I quaked somewhat as I noted his expression; his face grew dark, and he drew in his breath suddenly with a strange sound.

"I can tell you one thing about that man," he said slowly, and his old wrinkled hand lying on the tablecloth doubled itself suddenly, "he is a villain, a scoundrel, and, if ever I find you attempting to scrape acquaintance with him, out of this house you go, and—out of my will. So remember that, young man. I shall never again allude to this subject—nor will you. You know my wishes on this subject and I expect you to obey them. Have I spoken with sufficient plainness?"

"Quite, thank you, Uncle," I said humbly, but as I called to mind the face of the girl in the next house who intreated me to help her, I thought that the loss of Uncle Gregory's money would be as dust in the balance weighed against the delight of being of service to her.

That night I again strolled out, listening with strained attention for some sound from the adjoining garden, but all was silent. I climbed up to my post of vantage on the top of the wall, but the place was deserted, the house dark. I slid down again in a very depressed state of mind. Was I never to see my mysterious divinity again? Surely the Fates would be kind.

I could not sleep that night, and sick of tossing restlessly from side to side, I got up and looked out upon the quiet beauty of the night. Not a sound disturbed the silence; even the nightingales my uncle vowed inhabited his garden, must have been asleep; but as I stood there a very disagreeable interruption to the perfect peace came in the shape of the long-drawn howl of a dog.

It evidently was the bloodhound, and as I listened, the animal suddenly passed from his expression of canine woe into a horrible snarl, more like that of a wild beast than a dog—a hideous noise with a suggestion of ferocity that was really terrifying. I listened for some time, and then, thoroughly chilled both in body and spirit, I crept back to bed.

For five nights did I repeat this programme; the brute of a bloodhound always began his concert at the same hour, and I always awoke at that hour or was awake when he gave vent to his first blood-curdling howls.

"What a nuisance that dog next door is," I ventured to say to my uncle; "it howls every night, making the most awful row. I wonder you don't complain."

My uncle gave an odd smile, not a pleasant one, and rubbed his hands slowly together.

"I don't mind hearing it," he said composedly, "in fact, I rather like it. One day that beast will be too much for Harvey Payne, and it will kill him."

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He laughed as he spoke, and there was something malicious, unpleasant in his mirth; I could not help wondering what Mr. Harvey Payne, if that were his name, had done to my uncle to make the old gentleman so vicious against him.

That evening as I dutifully accompanied my uncle on his constitutional, we saw coming down the steps of the next house a very unprepossessing, haggard individual, with shifty eyes that were swiftly raised to glance at us, and then as swiftly dropped as their owner hurried past us. Uncle Gregory, who was leaning on my arm, suddenly gripped it fiercely.

"That was the man," he whispered hoarsely, "that was Harvey Payne. How—how I hate that man!"

"Why?" I asked in astonishment. My uncle gave me a dark look.

"What is that to you?" he said sternly; "suffice it that I do hate him, and remember I forbid you to have anything to do with him. He is a man without proper pride—he might try to force his acquaintance on you."

"Has—has he a daughter?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes," answered my relative curtly, "now you are to ask me no more. Henceforth the people in the next house are not to be mentioned."

I subsided, but that night I made another attempt to see my mysterious divinity. Since I had seen her father I did not wonder that she feared him, and from my uncle I had heard what a scoundrel he was. So I persuaded myself I was doing quite the right thing in attempting to save her, and I made my way across the lawn, keeping in the shadow, and over the wall that separated the two gardens. As I crept cautiously up to the house, I perceived that a window on the ground floor was open, but it was protected by thick iron bars. At the same moment the horrible snarling howl of the bloodhound sounded so close beside me that I involuntarily exclaimed; the noise ceased, there was a low cry, something white flashed at the window, and the next instant across the shrubs that kept me from her, I saw the woman I had come to save.

"You have kept your word," she said in a hysterical whisper, "but it is hopeless. *He* will be here directly, his visits are constant, now—since that night when I escaped him. Slot—the bloodhound—found—me—"

"And hurt you?" I asked furiously, "the brute——"

"Oh, no, no, only betrayed me," she answered hurriedly, "to my father. But go—go now, my father will be here directly; in three days he is going away—there will be only Slot and old Martin—the servant—if you come then—you will save me—it will not be too soon, for I know he means my death."

"He daren't," I answered hotly. "I'll lay an information with the police. I'll——"

"You promised," she breathed quickly, "recollect that, and—and he is my father—I will not have it known what he is. Only help me to get away from him—only that—oh, then—then when I am free what does anything matter? I don't want him punished; come and take me away—before I die."

I could just see her beautiful face, white as marble in the darkness, her voice was the sweetest, the most fascinating I ever heard, and I—I was a hot-headed young man.

"I'll come," I said recklessly; "though I don't even know your name I love you, and I'll do anything for you."

She held out her hand across the bushes; I was about to crash through them to seize and kiss it, when she disappeared; there was the sound of an opening door, and rightly imagining that someone had entered the room I hurried away, negotiated the wall safely, and entered the house without anyone having known of my expedition.

Though it is a good many years ago now, and I look back upon my mad youth from the sober superiority of middle age, I can still recall the thrill of excitement and exultant anticipation with which I set out on my adventure. It was a dark night. I had provided myself with a file to saw through those iron bars that divided me from the Girl in the Next House. I had mapped out quite clearly what I was to do with my prize when I should have secured it. I would at once take the poor child down to my mother's, where she could remain until Mr. Harvey Payne's wrath had somewhat subsided, and till I had a rise in my salary sufficient to justify me in thinking of matrimony. My poor dear mother! she had always spoilt me, and I was not in the least doubtful as to how she would receive me and my companion, but I was a little afraid that she would be dismayed when she should learn that by my doughty deed I had in all probability lost Uncle Gregory's favour.

I saw that my heroine was not at the window as I cautiously made my way to it; the bushes crackled horribly as I struggled through them. The window was wide open, and the room apparently empty and in total darkness. As I produced my file there floated out towards me the sound of the bloodhound's howl. It seemed close to me, as though the brute were in the room into which I intended to break. I do not think I am a greater coward than the generality of human beings, but I confess as I heard that dog the relish for my task died out of me. I crouched motionless whilst the howl changed into a snarl that had something hideous, bestial in it. I thought I heard the soft thud of an animal as he pattered about the room, then silence, then the swish of a gown, and the voice I loved calling softly: "Is—is anyone there?"

I was on my feet at the window instantly; my beloved was behind the bars. As she saw me she gave a little sob of joy.

"Quick, quick," she said, "there is not much time."

"I—I thought I heard the bloodhound in your room," I stammered, ashamed of my fears; "I began to fear that you were not there."

"Indeed I am," she answered petulantly, "take away these bars—let me out—or I shall die!"

I obeyed her command. As I filed away at the bars she retreated from me into the farthest corner of the big room, so that all I saw was an indistinct black mass. Now and again when I required encouragement, I glanced in her direction, but she never moved or spoke.

At last—my perseverance was rewarded; the bars yielded, I wrenched them apart, and leaped into the room. I was hot, dusty, exhausted, but—I had triumphed. I went up to the captive and held out my hand to her.

"Come," I said gently, "we must be going, there is no time to be lost."

She rose—I could see her pale face gleaming white in the darkness—she took my hand after a faint hesitation, the next instant she had hurled herself upon me, her arms gripping me like steel bands, and fastened her teeth in my throat.

The horror of this hideous and totally unexpected attack for an instant took me at a disadvantage, and I staggered back, the awful thing clinging to me as some vampire to its prey. I could feel the warm blood trickling down from the wound she had inflicted on me. I tried to free myself from her, but she seemed endowed with the strength of twenty men; strong, young fellow as I was, I was helpless. Once she released me—panting for breath, and I shouted for help, but she flew at me with renewed fury, striking at me with her fists as I beat her off, whilst she gave vent to the most awful cries. Even in the extremity of fear and horror, it flashed across me that these were the diabolical noises I had attributed to Slot the bloodhound, as I had lain and listened to them night after night.

I cannot describe the awfulness of that fight in the dark with that she-fiend: Her hair swept across my face ever and again, almost blinding me; sometimes she tried to strangle

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me with it, twisting it into a thick coil to wind about my neck, but in this she failed. In vain I tried to stun her by a well-directed blow, for I was now desperate. My calls for assistance were evidently not heard, and I knew it was a question now whether I was to kill or to be killed. But she had the swiftness of a snake with the strength of an enraged lioness, and if I succeeded in throwing her off, and rushing to the window, she was upon me again before I could reach it, and her deadly grip fastened on me once more.

I had hitherto succeeded in keeping my footing, for I felt instinctively that if I fell, all would be over with me; it would not take her long to strangle me as she desired, but I was growing exhausted whilst she seemed to gain fresh vigour with every onslaught. I slipped—half fell—recovered myself with a desperate effort, only to stumble once more, and this time I crashed heavily on to the floor, whilst my destroyer sent forth a hideous yell of triumph. I was conscious of something being twisted about my throat, of an agonisign sensation of suffocation. The girl was throttling me with her long, golden tresses. Then upon the darkness there burst a light, the she-fiend sprang to her feet, and ran howling from me, someone bent over me and caught me up in their arms. I was conscious of being borne away, whilst the cries still rang in my ears. I hear them sometimes even now, after all those years, they constitute my worst nightmare, from which I awake with the cold sweat pouring down me, and the scent of the red hair with which she tried to strangle me in my nostrils.

* * * * *

I was young and possessed a good constitution, therefore I recovered from the illness that supervened on my terrible adventure. I shrank at first from learning the mystery that surrounded the Girl in the Next House, but one day when my uncle and I were alone, he told me the whole story. He had been most devoted to me whilst I lay ill, and I took this opportunity of telling him how I regretted that I had disobeyed his injunctions, forbidding me to have anything to do with our next door neighbours.

He looked at me very strangely, and then he told me the truth. The girl in the next house was a raving lunatic, but her wretched father, Harvey Payne, was devoted to her; his one idea was to conceal her terrible condition, for he feared he might be forced to send her to an asylum, and though she hated him, he loved her. She was subject to homicidal mania, but for days would be tranquil and apparently sane. It was during one of the intervals that Mr. Payne left home on business. Her one idea was to escape. As is the case with lunatics, she displayed a diabolical cunning in attempting to gain her ends.

Often for weeks she would be perfectly rational, then an outbreak would occur, and she was more like a wild beast than a human being. Her hideous, bestial cries had induced Mr. Payne to keep a dog to account for them, and this animal was trained to guard the wretched girl and track her if, as was sometimes the case, she escaped into the grounds; but Slot never touched her, and proved a most effective keeper. Had it not been for the sudden return of Mr. Payne I should have been killed. He had come only just in time, for she had twisted her hair like a rope about my neck, and was deliberately strangling me.

"The servant had fallen asleep," said my uncle; "he was worn out with watching her, and he thought she was tranquil. It is all over with Harvey Payne's keeping it dark that she is mad. She is in an asylum now and there she will remain. I've hated him all these years, and even hoped that that red-haired fiend would kill him, that was why I never reported him for keeping a dangerous lunatic, but—I've seen him and it's a pitiable sight—my hatred died when I saw it."

"Uncle Gregory," I said timidly, "why did you hate him so?"

My uncle did not answer me at once, then with averted face he spoke.

"Because," he said, "Harvey Payne was the man who stole from me the woman I loved, the woman who was my promised wife became his, and she was the mother—she died when the child was but a few days old—of the Girl in the Next House."

Sybil Campbell Lethbridge.

IN THE SHADOW OF CRIME.

Telling How a Girl Saved Her Lover from Death.

A SMALL cottage, plain and unpretending, neatly painted, with roses and honeysuckle clambering over the windows and almost hiding them from view. It was set back a little way from the road, and was separated from it by a wooden fence.

Everything about had the appearance of being well cared for. The lawn in front was close-shaven, and the large garden in the rear was in the best of order.

If things outside the cottage looked trim, the inside of that pleasant abode was precision itself, and well it might be, for, as a housekeeper, Dora Martin, John Martin's daughter, was second to none in the county.

She was a motherless girl, had been so for years, and lived in this lonely spot with her father and an old aunt; their nearest neighbours on the town side being six miles away while those in the opposite direction (with the exception of a man named Dixey who lived about a mile from the farm), were twice that distance.

Old Martin had always been passionately fond of his only child, and, not caring to lose her, made it a point to discourage suitors. Still, following Dora's footsteps for some time, there had been two very devoted lovers.

One was Joe Gorham, rather a handsome young fellow, with the reputation of being somewhat dissolute and reckless. His father was at one time a wealthy farmer, but, on dying, left his property in such a mortgaged condition, that when the affairs of the estate were finally settled, there remained from the wreck just sufficient to yield the heir a small income, which was generally spent before it came to hand.

Everybody knew that John Martin had a snug bank account, and that when he died Dora would come in for both money and farm. People said this was more of an attraction to Joe Gorham than Dora herself.

Be that as it may, the girl cared little for him, and when asked why, gave as a reason that she had heard he was idle and dissipated. The truth was, she loved somebody else, that somebody being Paul Ellis, a young physician from the neighbouring town of Answell, who had come there about a year previous.

He was not handsome, but had a quiet, pleasant face, and he worked hard to build up a practice.

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Paul Ellis became acquainted with Dora in this wise. John Martin, with his sister and daughter, drove into Answell every Sunday morning to attend service in the one little chapel which the town boasted. Paul was also an attendant, and regularly once a week he sat in the same seat, from which he commanded a good view of Dora.

Gradually he grew to divide his attention between her pale, beautiful face, and the words of the white-haired old minister in the pulpit. The girl never glanced his way, but it was a pleasure for him to mingle with the little flow after service, when they were leaving the church, and as Dora came by, to feel her dress brush his hand as she passed him in the aisle.

Farmer Martin's family used to drive to worship in an old-fashioned wagonette. One Sunday when they had arrived at the chapel, Dora attempted to alight unaided, while her father was securing the horse. In so doing she fell, and Paul, who was passing slowly along, watching her intently, ran to the rescue, getting for reward a pleasant "Thank you, sir."

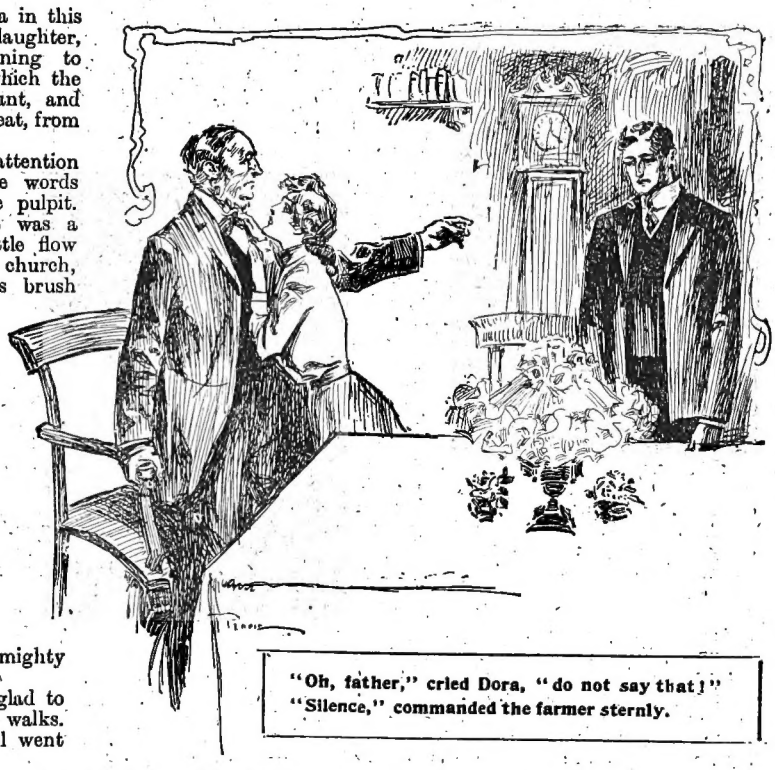
Farmer Martin cried, in his bluff way:

"Why, Dora, how awkward you are."

Then turning to Paul, he continued:

"You are the new doctor, if I don't mistake? Come in and see us when you are passing. Who knows but what we may give you a job some day, though I think it's not probable, as we are a mighty healthy lot.

Paul answered something about being glad to go in any case, as he was fond of long walks. There were a few more words and they all went into service.



"Oh, father," cried Dora, "do not say that!"
"Silence," commanded the farmer sternly.

The weeks slipped by, and then, somehow, almost before he knew it, Paul was calling often at Farmer Martin's quiet home, and Dora had grown to look for his coming as eagerly as he watched for the days on which he could visit her.

This had not escaped Joe Gorham, and he was bitter thereat, for poor as were his chances before of winning Dora's hand, he now saw that success was impossible. Affairs stood in this way for about six months previous to the evening on which my story commences.

This particular day Paul had spent at the farm, where he remained to tea. His visits had been so regular for some time that Farmer Martin looked upon his presence as quite a matter of course. The young man's conversation was interesting, and he liked him.

When he saw that things were "going too far," as he phrased it, then he would speak out. As usual in such cases matters had progressed very rapidly, and Dora marvelled at the pleasant way in which her lover was treated.

Everything looked very bright. Paul had already told his love, had gained Dora's promise, and on this evening he was to ask her father's consent to their marriage.

Tea was over, Aunt Margaret, Mr. Martin's sister, was dozing in her easy-chair. Dora leant against the window-sill, looking out into the falling shadows, and the two men still remained in their places on opposite sides of the table.

Paul had been trying vainly for some moments to say what was in his mind. At last, mustering up courage, he began in an off-hand, manly way, although a little nervous, and told the old farmer his secret.

A change swept over the face of Dora's father. His jovial smile disappeared, and in its stead came a stern, hard expression. The girl at the window, her heart beating rapidly with hope, waited eagerly for his words. They came slowly and decidedly.

"Mr. Ellis," he began, "I might have known how your visiting would end, if I had not been a fool and placed too much confidence in you. Couldn't you come here without making love to my daughter? If I had suspected anything of the kind, you should never have darkened my doors. What, take my girl from me? Never, sir, until I am dead. And now, Mr. Ellis, you will please not come here again."

"Oh, father!" cried Dora, rushing forward, "do not say that!"

"Silence!" cried the farmer angrily. "The man has bewitched you with his sweet talk. I say again that no one shall have my child and my money until I am dead."

Paul's face reddened, but knowing that words were useless at such a moment, he arose, and passing quietly out, said:

"Good night, all."

Dora, through her tears, saw him going down the road, not towards Answell, but in the opposite direction. She threw herself into a chair and wept piteously, but her father was inexorable. After a few minutes, he said:

"I'll have no more of those fellows about. The next time I come home and find Gorham here, I will serve him the same way that I served Ellis. And now, girl, tell William to saddle the horse. I'm going to Rockford to-night to settle for that piece of land which I bought last week. I drew the money to-day, and want to get it off my hands."

Dora passed out to do as she was ordered, while the old man sat down, and drawing forth a huge leather purse, counted his money—two hundred pounds in bank-notes. He wrapped them up again and settled himself for a smoke before starting on his journey.

Presently Dora returned. As she entered the door, her aunt suddenly started up, and pointing towards the window opposite to where she was sitting, cried excitedly:

"What's that?"

"What's what?" growled the farmer.

"I thought I saw a man's face at the window."

"You must have been dreaming," said her brother, emptying his pipe.

Dora wondered if the face could have been Paul's, or if her aunt had only imagined she saw somebody. Her musings were cut short by the appearance of the horse. The farmer went out and mounted him, saying to Dora and his sister:

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"I'm going to stop for an hour or more at Dixey's on my way to Rockford, so that it will be late before I get home. Don't wait up for me. Go to bed early. Good night." He turned his horse's head then, as if a thought had come to him called to Dora: "See here, girl. Kiss your crusty old father good-night. Keep up your spirits. It will be time enough for you to go to someone else when I am dead."

His daughter kissed him and watched him out of sight. Turning wearily back into the cottage, she fell at her aunt's feet, laid her head in the old woman's lap and seemed heart-broken. Neither spoke a word.

When the clock struck nine they retired to the room which they shared in common. Aunt Margaret was soon enjoying a tranquil sleep, but Dora lay awake until late in the night, planning how she would win her father's consent to her marriage with Paul.

The following morning, at the early hour of five o'clock, both women were awakened by a loud knocking at the front door.

Rising hastily, Dora went to the window, and opening it cautiously, looked out. Standing below on the doorstep was Dixey, the man at whose house Farmer Martin was to have called the night before. The opening of the window caused him to glance up. His face was ashy pale.

"Miss Martin," he said, "will you tell your aunt to come down quickly. I want to see her."

Dora, marvelling at the man's early visit, his scared face, and excited manner, grew alarmed, and, having delivered his message, ran to her father's room to acquaint him with the strange occurrence.

Throwing open the door, she gave a start of surprise. The room was untenanted, and the bed had not been slept in.

Filled with a singular misgiving, she rushed to the side-door by which her father always let himself in when he came home late at night. It was just as she had arranged it for him. The bolt was still drawn, showing that he had not returned.

Running to her room, she hastily threw on a wrapper, and, in another instant, accompanied by her aunt, was descending the stairs. Opening the door they found Dixey, his hat in his hand, a frightened look on his face. Before he could speak Dora had clutched him by the arm, and was saying in a husky voice:

"Mr. Dixey, what is the matter? Don't keep me in suspense. There is something wrong with father. In Heaven's name, tell me what it is! Did he fall from his horse?"

"Yes, miss," the man said confusedly, "I think he did."

"Is he badly hurt?"

"Yes, miss," was the reply.

Dora loooked straight into the messenger's face, saying in a slow, measured way:

"My father is dead."

"Yes, that's it. He's dead—*murdered!*"

Aunt Margaret screamed, and Dora fell to the floor, insensible. The former, although well-nigh stunned, did not lose her presence of mind.

"Mr. Dixey," she said, "go into the kitchen and get me some water."

He started for it, while she, half-dragging and half-carrying the girl, managed to place her on a sofa in the parlour.

The water having arrived, she proceeded to bathe the face of her charge, listening meanwhile to Dixey's story.

"Mr. Martin," he began, "called at my house early last night. We talked for over an hour. Then he started off, saying that he was going to Rockford. This morning, about three o'clock, some country people who were coming to Answell, woke me up and said they had found the dead body of a man on the bridge about five miles back. There was a knife sticking in the breast. Down below on the rocks was a horse with his legs broken. When they had finished the account we started back. As soon as I had seen and recognised the body, I felt fit to die of fright."

"Where is it now," asked the old lady.

"At my house," replied Dixey. "We brought it along in the cart"

"Return at once," said Aunt Margaret, "and drive here with it."

The man left.

Dora had now opened her eyes, and was moaning and muttering in an incoherent way.

After some trouble she was placed in bed, where she lay completely dazed. The hours dragged on.

At length a cart appeared, bearing all that was mortal of John Martin. With it were a dozen or more people who had joined the mournful procession as it came along the road.

At sight of her brother's lifeless body, Aunt Margaret was overcome with grief. Dora remained in bed, where she was experiencing the first symptoms of a fever. Dixey, having in his possession the knife which had remained sticking in the farmer's breast, went on to Answell to notify the authorities of what had occurred. They were soon on the ground trying to solve the mystery.

A couple of days passed and the inquest was held, the verdict being "murder at the hands of some person or persons unknown." Then came the funeral, followed by the startling report that the murderer had been apprehended and that he was none other than Paul Ellis.

Everybody scouted the idea of his guilt until the existing suspicions were revealed. Paul protested his innocence in vain. All the circumstances surrounding the murder pointed towards him as the assassin, and he was imprisoned to await trial.

Weeks passed on, and for a time Dora hovered between life and death. The trial had been postponed until her recovery. The first use she made of her returning strength was to visit her lover. To no purpose did she speak to him with words of comfort and consolation. His only reply was: "I am innocent, but everything is against me, and I foresee the result."

Still the girl was hopeful, and each day found her a visitor at the jail.

The morning of the date fixed for the trial dawned at last. First called to the witness-box was Aunt Margaret. She told of what occurred at the cottage on the night when the crime was perpetrated—of Paul's demand for Dora's hand, and the stormy refusal of Farmer Martin's saying: "No one shall have my child and my money until I am dead."

Then she spoke of Paul leaving the house, and going, not towards his home in Answell, but in the direction of Rockford. Whether he was aware that her brother had a large sum of money in his possession she could not say.

Damaging as was this testimony, Dora was obliged to corroborate it, and did so, feeling almost crazed at the thought that she was helping to convict the man who was dearer to her than life.

Now came the evidence of Dixey and the men who had discovered the body. They recognised a weapon shown as the one which had been found sticking in the body. Nothing further could be elicited from them. Joe Gorham was next in the box and proved a valuable witness for the prosecution. He carefully examined the knife, and swore that he had often seen it in the prisoner's possession.

It was a peculiar surgical instrument which he well remembered. His testimony was succeeded by that of the woman at whose house Paul lived. It was to the effect that her lodger had been away from home nearly all of the night on which the crime was committed, and that he had returned about three o'clock in the morning, looking pale and haggard, his shoes thick with dust, and his clothing travel-stained.

On being questioned respecting his absence, he replied that he had been out taking a walk. Some further testimony ensued, all of which tended to blacken Paul's case.

However, no trace could be found of the money which Farmer Martin had with him when he met his death, and, as it had been proved conclusively that the murder took place on the way to Rockford, if was pretty clear that the assassin had secured the purse.

Paul testified in his own behalf that, after leaving the cottage on the eventful night, he had walked about half way to Rockford, and turning into the woods, seated himself

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on a fallen tree, thinking over his disappointment. While there, he dropped asleep.

Waking later in the night, he sauntered back to Answell. The knife found in the body was undoubtedly his, but he could not explain its presence there, as he had not even missed it.

This was his whole story. Witnesses he had none. His lawyer made the best defence possible, and the case was given to the jury.

In half-an-hour they returned with a verdict of "Guilty." Sentence of death was pronounced.

The doomed man was thoroughly crushed. He had fallen into a deep melancholy from which nothing could rouse him, and in this state was returned to his cell.

The days sped by like lightning. Dora saw her lover and told him that she still believed him innocent, but she began to despair. Turn which way she might there was no help to be had. She could do nothing. Her face had grown thin and white, as day succeeded day and brought only its own weight of woe.

The time lying between Paul and death was almost over. Only three days more. Surely, she thinks, God will send some help to them. She prays and hopes on. Nothing comes.

It is the eve of Paul's last day on earth. His life is spanned by hours only. To-morrow he will be dead. Dora is with him, still strong in her belief of his innocence, still as true and trusting as in the old, happy days when first she learnt to love him. They are standing together, each peering into the other's face, the sunlight of the dying day pouring in a rich flood through the barred prison window. Paul is speaking. He says, like one in a dream:

"Dora, darling, this is the last time I shall see you."

"No," she replies brokenly; "to-morrow, Paul—to-morrow I will come in the morning and remain with you till—the end. God may yet send something. Why is he so hard on us?"

"It is fate," Paul answers.

Then, seeing that the jailor had left them for a moment, he continued rapidly:

"Dora, when they call me to-morrow I shall be dead. Do you understand? Don't betray me. I have a knife in my pocket. If no help comes by daylight, I shall be my own executioner."

"Oh, Paul, Paul," she sobs, "do not be guilty of that! If we have no hope in this world, let us at least hope for a hereafter."

A step sounded near the door.

"Don't betray me," he whispers hurriedly. "Do you want me to submit to the disgrace of the gallows? Be brave."

Dora is weeping on his breast as the turnkey cries: "Time is up!"

She found the weapon with which her father had been murdered.

Paul gently loosens her arms, kisses her repeatedly, and, with his white face grown whiter, says, in a low tone: "Good-bye, my love, until eternity."

They take her away. She acts like one demented, and is repeating, half-aloud: "Oh, Heaven, send us a sign—send us a sign."

She goes slowly home. Aunt Margaret expects to see her weeping bitterly, but she comes in pallid and stony, saying still: "Oh, for a sign—a sign."

The old lady asks what she means, and gets no reply. Dora, her hands clasped on her knees, sits rocking to and fro until bedtime. The clock tells the hour of nine, and together the two women ascend the stairs.

Aunt Margaret goes quickly to bed, having given up the useless task of persuading her niece to do likewise. The latter, habited in a loose white wrapper, lies stretched on a sofa, still repeating in a sort of wail:

"Oh, Heaven, give us a sign—give us a sign."

Aunt Margaret has been sleeping soundly for some time. A noise disturbs her and she starts up. The pale rays of the moon shining through the window, light up the part of the room where Dora was lying.

She is no longer there, but, instead, almost prone on the floor, her arms stretched under the sofa, as if groping for something, her eyes staring wide, and her whole appearance that of a maniac. Just then she rises, her right hand closed tightly, and says, in a tone of triumph: "I have it! I have it! Thank Heaven!"

The old woman tenderly folds her arms about the white figure. Dora wakes with a bitter cry of disappointment, moaning, "It was only a dream."

Weepingly she tells how she dreamt that she visited the spot where her father had been murdered. On the rocks below she saw his missing purse. The thought struck her that it would clear Paul, and she had placed her hand on it, when she awoke.

Her aunt says soothingly: "My poor child!"

Dora once more throws herself on the sofa and closes her eyes, while Aunt Margaret goes back to bed and slumbers quietly. Not so with her niece. In a few moments the hands are busy again, and she is muttering incoherently.

Suddenly she is standing in the middle of the room, wide awake, every nerve quivering with intense excitement. Her hands are pressed against the sides of her head as if to keep it from bursting. The dream has been repeated.

She is trying to think what it means, or if it means anything. Heartbroken from thoughts of the morrow, and

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ready to grasp at any hope, however faint, she is still inclined to chide herself for placing the slightest faith in it.

Then she remembers all the stories about visions which she has heard from her childhood. She shakes her head mournfully and sits down. In a moment she is up again pacing the floor restlessly.

Her eyes light on the clock. It is a quarter of two. She almost swoons with horror when she reflects that at four it will be *daybreak*.

One moment she stands irresolute; the next she has passed out of the room and is stealing noiselessly down the stairs. Something seems to impel her onward.

She opens the door cautiously. Within and without there is a hush like death. Now she is skimming along the road towards Rockford.

On, on she goes, past Dixey's cottage, running as she never ran before, and every little while glancing over her shoulder—looking for the first faint streaks of dawn.

The bridge looms in sight; her brain reels as she sees it. Soon she is flying over the well-worn timbers, and descending the rocks on the other side. Now she hesitates and fears to put her dream to the test.

Slowly she goes downward step by step. She has reached the place indicated. Only to turn an angle of the bridge and she will be on the spot where the dream showed the purse. She glides round the corner.

The rock, white from waters pouring over it, shines clear in the moonlight. *There is nothing on it.* Dora falls with a cry of agony—what right had she to hope? Her last straw is snatched away.

The night breeze chills her, and she wearily rises to commence her homeward journey. As she does so the sound of horses' hoofs falls on her ear.

They grow nearer and nearer. It is probably a farmer on his way to Rockford. She waits for him to pass the bridge—this he does not do.

Instead, he fastens his horse in a clump of bushes away from the roadside, and cautiously descends the rocks. Dora, terrified though she is, creeps into the shadow and watches his every movement.

A slouch hat conceals his face, but his manner is strangely familiar. He appears to be searching for something, and turns stone after stone, peering carefully into the crevices. Finally, he gives up in despair. Dora sees him mount his horse and ride swiftly away. Who was he, and what did he want, are the thoughts which fill her brain.

So absorbed has she been that fear has almost driven Paul from her mind. She moves forward. Almost unknowingly she is doing what she saw another doing a few moments before—turning over the stones and peering into the crevices.

The fading moonbeams strike something lying on a little ledge. It gleams like silver. She reaches forth her hand and shudders as it touches something cold as steel. It *is* steel—it is a dagger.

Raising it close to her eyes, she sees a red, rusty stain halfway to the hilt, and on the hilt itself, gracefully carved, she discerns this letter—J.

The familiar manner of the man who was there but now comes back to her.

Link on link in a chain of evidence flashes through her mind. *She has found her father's murderer.*

Two words escape her lips—"Thank God!"

She struggles up the rocks, gains the road, and renewed strength fills her body. Once more she is flying along—this time back to Answell.

How far away the town appears. Will she ever reach it? Despair gnaws at her heart. Already her feet begin to burn, and a sharp pain has crept into her side, but she never wavers. Daylight is rapidly approaching. Oh, for an hour of respite—a half-hour.

"Paul, Paul!" she cries. "Wait for me—wait for me!"

Dixey's cottage is near. For a moment she thinks of rousing the man and giving him the knife—but the time he will lose in getting ready may cost Paul's life.

No, she alone must do what is to be done. As she passes her own home the light in the east glows brighter. Streaks of dawn are creeping above the hilltops. She has still three miles to go. If she could rest but for one minute.

With a failing heart she hears the birds commencing to twitter in the trees. Will she be too late, after all?"

At last the town is in sight. It is just below her. She reaches it and totters along to the jail.

Scarce strength enough is left her to beat upon the heavy entrance. In a short time the turnkey is at the door, and starts back at the sight which meets his gaze. Dora, scarcely able to speak, mutters:

"Here is the knife which killed my father. *Joe Gorham did it.* I have proofs. For Heaven's sake, tell Paul at once!"

"But——" begins the man.

"Go, go!" cried the girl. "Every second is precious. It is a matter of life and death. Paul must know it this very instant." The jailer goes towards the prisoner's cell, Dora following. He throws open the door.

Paul is lying as if asleep, his face to the wall. In vain the turnkey tries to awaken him. Dora rushes forward. The condemned man's face shows ghastly in the early light. She catches his arm. The blood is dripping from a severed artery. Throwing up her hands, she falls to the floor, crying:

"Too late—too late!"

In another instant all is commotion. A physician is called. He arrives barely in time, for the prisoner has bled almost to death. News of the attempted suicide spreads through the town.

Following fast in its wake is another rumour that the real murderer has been arrested, and that he is Joe Gorham. This creates the wildest excitement, and when Dora's story becomes known she is the heroine of the hour.

When a month has flitted by, the second trial is over, and another prisoner occupies the cell where Paul had seen so many bitter days.

Joe Gorham made a full confession. On that fatal night he was on his way to visit Dora. In the road he found a knife dropped accidentally by Paul. He put it in his pocket intending to return it.

As he passed the cottage-window (where Aunt Margaret saw the face), he overheard Farmer Martin speak of going to Rockford with a sum of money. Starting off, he waylaid him at the bridge.

After the crime had been committed he threw away the weapon, and, remembering the knife that belonged to Paul, pressed it into the body, knowing that by so doing he would fasten suspicion upon his rival.

Not feeling secure so long as his own knife lay hidden among the rocks beneath the bridge, he went to search for it on the very night of Dora's dream. The coincidence was a fortunate one for Paul.

In Farmer Martin's house there has for years been a happy family, presided over by Paul and Dora. Often in the summer twilight and again before a blazing fire in winter, when the little ones are snug in bed, they recall an eventful past. To Paul the dream still seems wonderful. Dora, however, with her woman's faith, always looks upon it as one of God's great favours, and tells Paul that it was a sign. Then he says: "But the age of miracles has passed."

Dora answers:

"Whatever it was, we cannot help being grateful for it."

And they *are* grateful.

Ramsay Morris.

To Story Writers.

We shall be pleased to consider complete novelettes of about 20,000 words in length, and to pay cash down for those accepted. Manuscripts must be type-written (or very legibly hand-written), and should be sent to The Editor, *Short Stories*, Henrietta Street, London, W.C. Postage for return of MSS., if unsuitable, should be inclosed.

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DR. HARLEY'S MISTAKE.

A Tale of Love, Wealth, Strychnine, and a Strong Will.

EVERYBODY wondered why Robert Harley, the young M.D., had not fallen in love with his cousin, Kitty Marriott, but had chosen to devote himself to Miss Bertha Wilson. The former was a sweet, amiable girl, according to the gossips, whereas the latter was proud and haughty in her bearing, attractive—almost beautiful—yet not the sort of girl that most men would care for.

Love, however, is a strange thing, and it often happens that a man selects the very woman least in the minds of those who are speculating on the choice he will make. That is exactly how it was with Dr. Robert Harley.

When he looked about for a practice that might be going cheap, one that might be worked up into something good, he considered himself fortunate in acquiring the connection of the recently deceased Dr. Marriott. The practice had suffered considerably through Marriott's illness and enforced neglect of his professional duties, and this condition of things had been taken advantage of by a rival practitioner, so that it was not worth a great deal; but Harley was confident that he would wake it up. He was not a man of means; nearly all the money left by his father had been spent in his training, and the sum required for the purchase of the connection was just within his power. One reason for regarding himself as fortunate was that he had the goodwill of the widow and her daughter; they lived in very straitened circumstances, but their influence still counted for something.

Dr. Harley was the kind of young man who would soon win the favour of most persons with whom he came in contact; this was a good backing for his professional skill and the combination quickly began to tell. He had passed his exams brilliantly and had done some good hospital work; most people believed that he was a clever fellow, and not the man to vegetate in the town; yet there was a feeling among others that he had just a trifle too much confidence in himself.

"It's a fine thing to have such confidence in one's abilities," observed a modest tradesman on whose daughter the doctor had attended, "and I don't say that you can get on without it, because you can't. But there is a danger of allowing it to go too far. Conceit? No, I can't say he puts on side, because he's most unassuming in his ways. It's difficult to explain, but it strikes me that there's not enough ballast. Yet he is quite unconscious of it."

Only a minority shared the opinion of the worthy tradesman and Robert Harley increased in favour until it dawned upon the majority that he had fallen in love with Bertha Wilson instead of Kitty Marriott. Then he went down a little in popularity. The only proper and natural thing for him to do was to marry Kitty Marriott, they imagined, and they resented his contrary action; but they got over it and, although they did not approve, they admitted that he had a right to please himself.

There was not the shadow of a doubt that he was madly in love with Bertha, and there was equally as little doubt that Kitty received a terrible blow when she discovered the fact. If Robert Harley had been less blinded by his passion, he would have noticed the wan appearance of the usually blooming Kitty, and he could not have failed to observe that her gaiety had almost disappeared. He did not notice these things, partly because his visits to Mrs. Marriott became less frequent—in fact, they practically ceased, for his time was always occupied with Bertha.

It was confidently expected that the engagement would be announced, there was no secret on the part of Harley concerning his feelings towards her. The announcement that did come at length was not anticipated and staggered the circle in which Dr. Robert Harley moved. The announcement was preceded by an interview between Harley and Bertha. He called on her, as usual, but was checked in his customary outburst by the manner of greeting; he felt chilled.

"What's wrong, Bertha? What have I done that I am denied the lover's kiss?" he asked, his voice quivering with emotion.

"My dear Robert, you have done nothing, except that you are poor!" she replied coolly, seating herself in a comfortable chair and looking at him without flinching.

Robert stepped back in amazement.

"I know I am poor, Bertha, but I shall succeed! You have told me so yourself! And what does it matter if we love each other? I love you, and you return that love. You cannot deny it!" he added passionately, as she shook her head.

"I have no intention of denying that I have some affection for you, Robert, but it is not proof against the prospect of poverty. You may succeed, but I do not think I can wait for that. I have had a very advantageous offer of marriage, which it is my intention to accept!"

It was all said in so cool and business-like a fashion that Robert Harley went nearly mad. He raved and strode about the room; then he knelt by her side and pleaded; but she was immovable.

"I want riches, and I mean to have them!" she assured him. "But need we be bad friends on that account?"

She smiled at him bewitchingly, pleadingly. His head was in a whirl; he knew not what she said or how he answered, but she twisted him round her finger and he left her just as much her slave as he had ever been. She was slipping away from him, yet—what? He only knew that she loved him and that he did not blame her for leaving him for one who could give her riches. They could still be friends.

So the announcement was made, not of the engagement of Dr. Robert Harley, with Miss Bertha Wilson, but of the approaching marriage of that young lady with Mr. James Yates, an elderly man with a banking account of considerable importance. Questions levelled at Harley elicited no satisfactory reply and in the end people gave up the task of fathoming the mystery.

Two years passed away, and those two years wrought a change in the opinions of Dr. Robert Harley. Slowly the effects of his infatuation had worn off and he wondered how he could have been so blindly in love with the woman who was now Bertha Yates. He noticed the change in Kitty, whose mother he visited more often, and he became conscious that the alteration from a merry girl to a charming, but quiet

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woman had been caused by his own love affair with Bertha. He asked himself if he loved Kitty—really loved her—and if she could forgive him for the past and return his affections, but to those questions he was unable to find a satisfactory answer. He drifted on without daring to probe the subject more deeply, content to be regarded as the friend of Kitty and her mother.

The Yates's were not happy; so much soon became the current rumour, and rumour deepened into certainty. There were frequent quarrels because he would not allow her more money and they spent much of their time apart. Mr. Yates suffered from chronic dyspepsia, which did not tend to make the household any the happier, for it made him irritable and complaining.

It was about a year after Yates' marriage with Bertha that Dr. Robert Harley was called to see him and prescribe. This was rather a trial for Harley; at the beginning of their married life he had been a guest, with others, at the Yates's on several occasions, but he had discontinued these visits as his better self had returned, and it was necessary to summon all his self-possession to respond to the professional call. Yates, although Harley was not aware of it, had called him in because he had gained a reputation and because he had divined something of what had gone before. "If I swear that he could do me no good, it will damage him," thought the elderly husband, "and it will torment her to see him here!"

Yates could never discover, much to his chagrin, whether the second object was attained or not, but it is certain that he failed in the first. He was bound to admit that, although Harley did not effect much, he did accomplish a little more than his predecessors in the office of medical attendant, and for that reason he was always called in to see Yates when the dyspepsia was bad.

About five o'clock one cold morning he was aroused by a violent ring at his night bell and, on placing his ear to the tube, learnt that Yates was very ill, and that he, Harley, was wanted at once. Muttering something rather uncomplimentary to persons who had pet ailments, Harley dressed, not too quickly, and went out. He was admitted to the Yates's dwelling by Bertha herself, whose face was white but calm.

"I am glad you have come, doctor," she said quietly, "but I fear that you are too late."

"What do you mean?" queried Harley in surprise, as he followed her to the bedroom.

She made no answer, but pointed to the bed and then covered her face with her handkerchief and wept. One glance at the motionless figure on the bed was sufficient for Harley, but he made an examination.

"Dead!" he exclaimed, as he turned to the widow. "Mrs. Yates, I am very, very sorry. How did it happen? I fear that there must be an inquest."

She shuddered.

"Inquests always seem so dreadful. I thought that an inquiry would not be necessary, as you have attended him regularly. But if it must be——I will tell you how it occurred."

She turned her face and hid it once more in her handkerchief, raising it again after a minute's weeping.

"I cannot say that we were happy, but this is terribly sudden. He awoke and complained of pain, so I suggested that he should have a cup of hot water, which he thought was good for his complaint. I boiled some water myself, as I did not wish to disturb the servants, and gave him a cupful. It was very hot and I told him to wait a minute or so, but he was always very obstinate and would do as he liked." She stopped and heaved a sigh. "By long habits he could drink liquids hotter than most people. He drank the water pretty quickly, although it was so hot that I could scarcely bear to touch it with my lips. As he handed the cup back to me, he gave a cough and a groan, sank back on the pillow, and never moved again."

"Very sudden!" ejaculated Harley, in real sympathy.

"I thought he had fainted and tried to bring him round; but he didn't move, so I sent for you. Can nothing be done?"

"Nothing," replied Harley solemnly. "Try to bear up, Mrs. Yates. It is a sad trial. There must be an inquest, but it will be very formal."

He slipped off as soon as he decently could and sent a note to the coroner in due course. Harley was deputed to make the post-mortem examination, but found nothing more than a small quantity of fluid in the stomach.

At the inquest, all eyes were turned on Harley; it was a curious position, to be certifying to the cause of the death of the man who had supplanted him. There was but little to be said, and Harley gave his evidence clearly and easily. Death was due to syncope; the drinking of the water at something like boiling heat had been too much of a shock for a system already weakened to an abnormal degree and had caused failure of the heart's action. It was true that Mrs. Yates said that her husband had been in the habit of drinking fluids very hot, but the habit had availed nothing in this instance. He had done it once too often. He had no doubt as to the cause of death.

How vividly this evidence recurred to his fevered brain a week later. He was paying a visit to Mrs. Marriott, and the worthy lady had found an excuse for leaving him with Kitty.

"Can't you do something to stop the sale of rat-powders with free strychnine in, Dr. Harley?" she asked seriously. "Do you know, we have discovered that we have a rat here, and mother is dreadfully afraid. I went to a chemist for some rat killer, and he labelled it 'Poison.' He explained that he had made up his mind to do so for his own safety; he knew that there was free strychnine in it, but it had never occurred to him to label it until he heard of the death of Mr. Yates. I inquired why he should have been influenced by that, and he replied that Mrs. Yates"—there was a break here which Kitty tried vainly to cover—"had purchased some rat killer at his shop a day or two before, and the silly, nervous man took it into his head to imagine what would be said to him if somebody else's husband died suddenly after she had bought rat killer with strychnine in it and it was proved that she poisoned him! He declared that he was quite relieved on hearing that death was due to natural causes. But you ought to do something in this matter, really!"

Harley tried to tell her that there was a law on the subject, and that he would inquire into the particular rat killer in question, but he felt himself turning white as a horrible fear seized him. He took leave of Kitty and tried to shake off the sickening fear that weighed on him, but the more he tried, the tighter it seemed to grip him. By the time he reached his home he was reeling like a drunken man and his reputation for sobriety had been damaged in the eyes of the few who saw him.

Free strychnine! He uttered the words aloud, but they sounded hollow as they came from his parched throat. Had he made a mistake? He had performed his duty very perfunctorily; it had never occurred to him to go deeply into the matter. The more he thought it over, the more he became convinced that death was not due to the cause he had so airily assigned. The words of a certain tradesman, repeated to him by a "good-natured friend," came to his mind: "Self-confidence is a grand thing, if you haven't too much of it."

He determined to find out for certain whether his fear was founded or not; at any cost he would solve the doubt. The only way in which he could do this was to put a question to Bertha that would make her betray herself.

He sprang up and rushed to the door, but pulled himself up

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on the doorstep. It was absurd to suppose—Yet, they were not happy, and there might have been some hidden reason. He would go!

He was shown into the reception room and Bertha Yates entered, looking charming in her half-mourning, her face radiant with a bewitching smile.

"It is *so* good of you to come, Dr. Harley! It is like old times, and I was nearly guilty of calling you 'Robert.' Don't think me very dreadful! You know that I never loved him and that my life with him was unendurable. I cannot even pretend that I bore him any affection, and I am already in half-mourning. You understand, or you would not have come to me so soon after I had regained my freedom!"

The heartlessness of her words made him shiver. He nerved himself and looked her straight in the eyes as he spoke.

"Was that why you gave him strychnine in that cup of water?"

He noted the tell-tale look in her eyes; he saw the colour fade from her cheeks and lips. If it were true! He had been guilty of a blunder that would ruin his professional career and cast a stigma on medical testimony in general, if it were known. And if he remained silent, he would be guilty of abetting this woman, and he would allow to escape a woman who would not stop at murder to free herself and—and what? He guessed, and he trembled. Bertha herself told him, and the words seemed to stab him.

"What if I did?" she asked defiantly. "I learnt to hate him; I only wanted his money. He was too miserly, so I played my game. I cajoled him into making a will entirely in my favour. Last night he threatened to alter it." She was forgetting herself; she meant the night preceding the murder, but Harley understood. "So I gave him strychnine, you know where I got it from, I see! Now I am free—to come to you, the man I love!"

He turned from her in horror.

"It is my duty to make this matter public," he said with determination.

She recoiled as if from a blow.

"You would deliver me up to justice when I have freed myself from an intolerable existence and opened up the path to *our* mutual happiness! You dare not! You would ruin yourself and I would prove you to be my accomplice. Look at this letter!"

She took from the bosom of her dress a letter which she held up to him. He recognised it well; it was written when he was mad, mad in his infatuation, and in it he told her that he would do anything to win her, that nothing and nobody should stand between them for long! She laughed hysterically as he placed his hand to his forehead.

"Go and tell, and stand by me in the dock!" she cried. Then she added more gently. "Go now, and come back to me when you are calmer."

He went from her presence like one in a dream. His blunder would not be taken as a blunder in the face of that letter and supported by what she would say in her baffled rage. He felt unable to act for himself; he yielded to a sudden impulse and sought Kitty, in whom he confided, as a child might confide in a sister. He told her all, too full of his own misery to see hers.

"Mother is out this evening," she said in tremulous accents. "Wait here, dear, till I come back."

Neither observed the term of endearment. Harley remained in the chair with his face buried in his hands, and he heard her pass out without lifting his head.

"She loves him," murmured Kitty. "If she loves as I do, she will be ready to sacrifice herself for his happiness."

Kitty expected to find herself confronted by a woman fierce and obdurate, whom she hoped to melt by her appeal, but she found Bertha broken and weeping. She looked up at Kitty with a weary gesture.

"Why do you worry me?" she asked. Then she fired up, and demanded: "Did he send you?"

"No!" replied Kitty bravely, although she was trembling at the thought of the danger that threatened her beloved. "I have come because I love you, to ask you to do as I would do for his sake. I ask you to show that you love him, to prove the sincerity of your words."

"What do you want?" demanded Bertha more gently.

"I want you to save him. You have threatened him, but a woman who loves would never drag the man down with her in her crime by means of trickery, such as that letter and false-swearing. *That* is not love!"

Bertha gazed at her curiously.

"Would you sacrifice yourself for him? Yes, I believe you would! See!" Bertha walked to the fire, drew forth the fatal letter from her bosom and threw it into the flames. "There!"

She turned again to Kitty and stood motionless. The two women looked at each other for fully two minutes without speaking, each wondering what was passing in the mind of the other. "So that baby girl would sacrifice herself for Robert Harley!" thought Bertha. And Kitty was wondering what this strange woman would do to save Robert.

"Go back to him and tell him that he need fear nothing, nothing!" cried Bertha suddenly, making Kitty start. "I will show him that I, too, can do something for the man I love! Leave me now!"

There was a gleam of hope in the hearts of Dr. Robert Harley and Kitty Marriott as they separated after Kitty's return from her interview with Bertha, although neither could see how the ruin of the young doctor or the punishment of Bertha was to be avoided. Harley was determined to tell the story on the following day; he could point to the absence of any outward signs of the cause of death, due to the quick action of the poison, as proof of his innocence, but there was no excuse for his bungling of the post-mortem.

He was late in obtaining rest and as a consequence his troubled sleep lasted well into the morning. He had barely finished his toilette when Kitty Marriott was announced.

"Have you heard?" she gasped with a white face. "She has been found dead in the canal. It is supposed that she walked into it by accident in the thick mist last night. Did she? Or——"

"The criminal is punished, Kitty, and—there is no need to expose her crime," said Robert Harley brokenly. "The crime and the mistake will alike remain unknown to men. I understand now what she meant by saying that I need fear *nothing!*"

"It proves that she did love you, and that love will do much!" murmured Kitty. "Poor misguided woman!"

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EPISODE TWENTY.

Mr. Taskot in a Difficulty.

"Well, Olive Beresford, if anybody had ever told me that you would marry a man like that I wouldn't have believed them! Fancy fretting after a creature that can't look at you without sticking a piece of glass in his eye!"

It was Mrs. Windsor who thus voiced her disapproval of the engagement about which all the village folks were now wagging their tongues, and I hadn't the heart to be vexed at her candour. But I had no mind to let her think that my recent depression had been caused by fear lest Mr. Taskot should fail to put in an appearance, and I exclaimed vehemently:

"I didn't fret about him! How could I? He's not so charming as all that."

My friend looked at me with astonishment, which speedily gave place to concern as she noted my pale face and the dark rings which a night's weeping had brought round my eyes.

"Look here, dearie," she said, "there's something wrong about this business. I believe you've just let your vanity run away with you, and accepted the man without taking enough time to think about it. But it isn't too late to alter your mind, and you had better face the anger of a rejected lover than make a miserable marriage."

"I cannot help myself," I moaned. "He has my promise, and I dare not break it."

"You *dare* not? And I always thought you had any amount of courage! There must be something very queer behind this."

"Mr. Taskot!" announced our one maidservant, and Mrs. Windsor, looking very much upset, hurried out of the little drawing-room just in time to avoid meeting the individual who posed as my *fiancé*.

A curt nod was my only reply to his fulsome greeting. But he was not in the least embarrassed by my coldness. On the contrary, he smiled in evident enjoyment of conscious power, and plunged at once into the errand upon which he had come.

"I have been to see the vicar," he observed, sitting down opposite me. "There is no reason why we should not be married as soon as possible, so the banns will be read for the first time next Sunday."

"Next Sunday! How dare you make such an arrangement without first consulting me?"

"Because it would have been useless to consult you. You would have declined to permit the banns to be published so soon, and you would have urged all sorts of arguments against an early marriage."

"I shall still urge them. And I absolutely refuse to be married within six months."

"As I have said, I have seen the vicar, and the date is settled. I didn't want Maurice Ray to get it into his head that you hankered after him, and by being married first you can always deprive him of that boast."

"What do you mean?"

"Read this. Then you will know."

With trembling fingers I took from Mr. Taskot the *Morning Post* which he produced for my inspection, and read an announcement to the effect that a marriage had been arranged, and would shortly take place, between Miss Isola Lewis, only daughter and heiress of the wealthy manufacturer, Mr. Harrison Lewis, and Mr. Maurice Ray, the famous miniature painter.

I suppose Mr. Taskot had anticipated the effect this news would have upon me, for my pride really was instantly in arms, and I was furiously angry at having deluded myself into the belief that Maurice Ray had felt a warmer feeling towards me than the facts warranted. He had been very kind and helpful. And his manner had certainly not been that of a man who took merely a passing interest in me. But if he had cared much for me, I thought, he could not have so soon engaged himself to somebody else.

And yet, was there not ample excuse for forgetfulness on his part in the scene which he witnessed between Mr. Taskot and me? And was it not quite possible that it was the actual means of parting us for ever? The very thought diverted my anger from myself to my obnoxious suitor, and I turned to him with withering contempt both in my manner and my voice.

"Do you think," I asked, "that I am nothing more than a musical instrument, out of which you can evoke any tune you like? If so, you shall find yourself mistaken. You have been anxious from the first to make me think ill of Mr. Ray. Why, I do not know, for he and I hardly know each other. But I have come to the conclusion that you will say anything to further your own plans, and I think it very probable that you inserted that social item yourself. Otherwise, why be so eager to show it to me?"

A dark flush mounted to Mr. Taskot's flabby cheeks, and I was so sure that my shot had hit the mark that some of my lost courage returned to me. So also did a little wisdom, and though I resolved to fight for my future happiness, I had the sense not to put my companion on his guard yet by open rebellion when he answered:

"You are excited and out of sorts, my dear. In a few days, when you have fully realised how different your position will be as the wife of a rich man you will give me credit for desiring nothing so much as your happiness."

"You speak of yourself as a rich man," I rejoined, forcing myself to talk dispassionately. "Do you mind telling me what you call rich?"

A voluble flow of words answered me, and I was assured that the five thousand a year which Mr. Taskot enjoyed now would soon be supplemented by ten thousand per annum more.

"I am the destined heir of my uncle, Walter Taskot, Esq., of Malvern Dale, and as he is already old and feeble I am not likely to be kept long out of my inheritance."

This last was said with an air of triumph which made me shudder with dislike of the man who was evidently longing for the death of his nearest relative. But it gave me the cue for checkmating him, and my voice was quite firm as I asked:

"Has Walter Taskot, Esq., of Malvern Dale, any other nephew who expects to inherit from him?"

"Yes, I have a cousin. But his chances are too remote for consideration. He has never had the sense to cultivate the old man, or to keep his own little extravagances from his knowledge."

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"I'm not so sure that your cousin's star is not in the ascendant, after all."

"Indeed! How can that be?"

"Because the sight of the duplicate set of snapshots which I rescued from the clutches of the Vernons may induce your uncle to reconsider his will."

Ah! Here was a masterstroke at last! Mr. Taskot's face became visibly paler, and he with difficulty suppressed the oath which rose to his lips. But he quickly recovered himself and smiled confidently.

"If he were like most people's uncles," he said "he would probably kick me out of his will for more than one thing I have done. But he admires nothing so much as ingenuity, and will laugh heartily when I tell him about that signal code business. He will also welcome you as a congenial addition to the family circle, for he only needs to see the snapshots to know that you are not of the insipid schoolgirl type he detests."

This sounded fairly plausible, for one family may easily produce more than one rogue. But I did not ignore the momentary confusion my chance shot had caused, and I refused to regard Mr. Taskot's ascendency as irrevocable any longer.

"Your uncle would consider me a very insipid schoolgirl," I retorted, "if I allowed myself to be coerced into marrying you without making an attempt to get out of my difficulties without your aid. Anyhow, you can consider the engagement 'off' until I have interviewed Walter Taskot, Esq., myself."

And from this position, neither threats nor persuasions were able to move me. My set of snapshots were a strong enough weapon wherewith to fight my antagonist, and, when he left me, there was this difference between us—his show of confidence was fictitious, mine was real.

EPISODE TWENTY-ONE.

The Value of Local Esteem.

But my rising spirits were soon destined to be effectually damped. For, not long after Mr. Taskot had gone, with the unwelcome promise of returning on the morrow, Mr. Snaith, our vicar, came to see me, and his first words prepared me for something unpleasant.

"Good evening, ladies," he said, as both Mrs. Windsor and I rose to receive him. "I—I—I came to see Miss Beresford on a matter of some importance. Can I see her alone for a few minutes?"

Of course Mrs. Windsor immediately left us to ourselves, and I waited with some anxiety to hear what the vicar had come about.

"Miss Beresford," he began, the stiff manner in which he sat down showing that he was very ill at ease. "I hope you will exonerate me from any desire to cause you pain. But I have had a most extraordinary letter, conveying still more extraordinary charges against you, and I think it only right that you should be given an opportunity to refute them."

"Certainly," I agreed, my voice coming gaspingly, for I guessed at once that the letter which Mr. Snaith handed to me had something to do with the recent events at Vernon Towers and the neighbourhood. "Of course it was best to come to me at once, if anyone has said anything against me. Will you allow me to read the letter?"

Without a word, Mr. Snaith handed me the missive, and the while my blood seemed to turn cold within me, I read the following:

"*To the Vicar of Essondon.*

"*Dear Sir,—You may not be aware that Olive Beresford, a resident in your parish, who no doubt poses as an eminently respectable person, is a gambler, a swindler, and a thief. While recently visiting at Vernon Towers, at the invitation of a former school friend who had forgotten the reputation Olive Beresford acquired at school, your parishioner, by pretending to know nothing about cards, induced other guests to play with her for money, of which she won a large sum, both by fair means and by foul. The foul means consisted in inventing a code of signals which was exchanged between Miss. Beresford and another equally unscrupulous visitor named Taskot. Suspecting something of the sort, the host, Mr. Vernon, in order to protect his other guests from being swindled, took several snapshots which show the two conspirators in the act of giving the signals by which they were enabled to make phenomenal winnings, the result being that both of them were expelled from Vernon Towers, after being compelled to disgorge the greater part of the money they had won. Mr. Taskot departed there and then, but Miss Beresford, not content with the mischief she had already done, stole various things out of Mr. Vernon's private room. These were fortunately found in her dress-basket, packed ready for removal. But Mrs. Grainger, another lady guest of the Vernons, was induced to believe Miss Beresford the victim of a foul conspiracy to ruin her, and actually offered her hospitality to both the card-sharpers. This hospitality was accepted. But Mrs. Grainger was soon disillusioned, for she overheard Miss Beresford laughing about the way in which she had robbed the Vernons, and she instantly cleared her house of the treacherous visitors, and went to apologise to Mr. and Mrs. Vernon. The writer has only to add that Miss Beresford and Mr. Taskot went off together, and it is quite on the cards that two such congenial companions will marry each other, on the principle that they can pursue their career of fraud more easily as man and wife.*"

Did ever a girl have to read a more frightfully humiliating letter about herself than the shameful effusion which stamped me as a disreputable ingrate? I was frozen dumb with horror, and Mr. Snaith's look of grave sympathy changed gradually into one of contemptuous disgust.

"Your answer, Miss Beresford?" he demanded. "For Heaven's sake, tell me that this anonymous letter is as devoid of truth as most anonymous letters! What foundation is there for such a scandalous accusation as is here brought against you?"

"I shall go mad!" I murmured convulsively. "I allowed myself to be persuaded to do one foolish thing, and all the others were built upon that. It was the Vernons who cheated, and whatever Mr. Taskot and I did was only done in self-defence. It is Annabel who has thus tried to ruin me."

"Did you visit Mrs. Grainger? And did she overhear you admitting your guilt to Mr. Taskot?"

"She misconstrued something she overheard me telling him."

"You and he left her house together?"

"Yes."

"And you journeyed by train together?"

"Yes, but——"

"Pardon me, Miss Beresford, but I do not wish to hear any more subterfuges, for the matter looks fairly clear. Mr. Taskot, I take it, is the same person whose banns are to be read next Sunday, in conjunction with yours, a fact which at once verifies my correspondent's statements, although it may not justify their anonymous nature."

"So you believe all that has been said of me, Mr. Snaith?"

"I see no other course open for me."

"Very well, sir. Go your way, and I will go mine. But, remember, those banns were put in without my consent, by the man whose schemes have brought this disgrace upon me, and I forbid them to be read either next Sunday or any other Sunday."

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"Miss Beresford, is it possible, after all, that——"

"No, sir, nothing in the way of explanation is now possible between you and me. I have lived nearly all my life in your parish, and you can never have heard a breath of evil against me before. Yet you outrage me by believing a vile, anonymous letter! I have been the victim of circumstances, and I have almost allowed myself to be made unhappy for life, rather than risk losing the esteem of the people amongst whom I have hitherto lived. I now see how foolish I have been to give their consideration or sympathy a moment's belief, and I wash my hands of you and your parish for ever! Go, sir, and learn to practise a little of the Christian charity you are so fond of preaching from your pulpit!"

EPISODE TWENTY-TWO.

A Cowardly Attack.

All indecision was now at an end with me. I had put a fictitious value upon the esteem of my daily associates, and I had found it worthless. The vicar was the barometer upon which parish opinion would measure itself, and if he proved himself so susceptible to the stabs of slander, of what use would it be for me to rely upon anybody else here?

The letter was a cruel one, and I guessed that it was the outcome of Annabel's desire to avenge her defeat. But it proved of great value to me, for it opened my eyes to the folly of allowing myself to be subjugated by dread of exposure. Things could not very well be more unpleasant for me than they already were, and I resolved to at once leave a neighbourhood which no longer had any attractions for me.

Wherever I lived, my income would remain the same, so that did not need to enter into my calculations. But I had no money wherewith to take a journey which must necessarily be slightly expensive, for I had many belongings with which I did not intend to part.

To do her justice, Mrs. Windsor was very indignant with the vicar, who was never a great favourite of hers at any time. She, at any rate, believed in me, although I did not think it desirable to take her fully into my confidence. It was enough for her that I had fallen into the hands of rogues, and that there was a conspiracy to ruin me. She pitied me.

"I'll tell you what it is, dearie," she said, on the morning after the vicar's visit. "You go to my sister's, and stay there for awhile. If you like, I'll leave Essondon, too, for I'm not much in love with it myself. At least, I sha'n't be after you've left it."

"But I can do nothing without money."

"No, that you can't. But I can lend you some to leave with now, and you can pay me back at the quarter. After this Mr. Taskot has gone away, which he is sure to do when you are no longer here, we can arrange about what things you want to sell."

"Mrs. Windsor, you are a good woman, and a true friend, and I hope you and I will never be parted for long. I'll do exactly as you advise me. If I go away this afternoon, I shall escape any further unwelcome attentions, and, of course, you will not tell anybody where I have gone."

A few hours later, everything was in readiness. Mrs. Windsor had sent some luggage to the station, and as I wanted to go away without my departure being noticed, and without the risk of meeting any of the village folks, I bade good-bye to my friend in the house, and went alone towards the station by a roundabout road which would keep me clear of all the houses.

I could not help shedding many tears at having to go away under such a terrible cloud. But I saw no means of dispelling it just now, and my departure was the only way to get rid of Mr. Taskot, so I was trying to make the best of the situation when I was startled by hearing footfalls on the other side of the hedge which bordered the country lane I was traversing.

A hasty glance round convinced me that I had been mistaken, and I thought no more of the stealthy footfall until somebody sprang towards me from a gap in the hedge. So sudden was the surprise that I had no time to cry out ere a heavy cloak was thrown over my head, and in a few minutes I was in a state of absolute helplessness, being blindfolded, gagged, and securely bound by a man at whose identity I could only guess!

(To be concluded next week.)

THE GAME OF LOVE.

How an Uncertain Lover Won His Wife.

They sat in the conservatory, which place since time immemorial has been the one sought after by lovers. They were not lovers avowedly. He thought he was, but it seemed that he had made a mistake. And as for her—well, he had begun to think his case was hopeless in that direction.

Her name was Helen Travers, and he was Herbert Langdon. As they sat there, looking towards the ballroom, a fine-looking, military man passed before their view.

"What a handsome man he is," said Helen.

He, jealous at once, was not of that opinion, but he thought it politic to agree with her.

"Is he your ideal type?" he could not help inquiring bitterly.

"Not exactly," she said hesitatingly. "But I admire his looks."

"He certainly admires yours," he said significantly.

She blushed and suggested that the subject be changed.

"Not on my account," he said, taking his revenge and noting how her colour deepened. "I find the subject you have selected extremely interesting. I should like to know exactly what your ideal man is."

"Do you mean that I shall describe him as he exists in my imagination?" she asked. "I don't believe you could give a sketch of the woman you love in imagination."

"Yes, I could," he said boldly, "if *you* would sit for the portrait."

He had shown his hand now, and, according to the rules of the game, he should have received a blush at least in return for this speech. But she cheated him out of his due.

"I haven't time," she said in answer to his remark.

"It's not the time that's wanting, but the inclination," he replied.

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"Perhaps," she acquiesced.

"Well, describe him—your ideal," in his eagerness playing into her hand.

"Of course, to begin with, he must be tall."

"How tall?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. What is a good height?"

"My height," he offered as a suggestion. Then he asked what colour he should be.

"Dark," she responded.

"I think you'd better make him fair," he responded. He was fair, and thought he was losing a point. "Opposites always fall in love, you know."

"Not always," she said, laughing. "Besides, I can't give him curly hair."

"Why not?"

"I can't bear curly hair. It means bad temper. And you are violent, you know."

There she threw away a trick.

"But you are sweet-tempered, you know. And your hair curls."

"Does it?" she asked. "Yes, I suppose it does. But that's different. Besides, I like it in a girl, don't you?"

"I think it's lovely!" he said. "Let's see now how far have we got? He is of medium height, is fair, and has straight hair. And is he to have a beard?"

"No, certainly not," she said. "How can I tell if he has a good firm chin unless he is clean shaven?"

This was true, and he felt his jawbone furtively. It carried a blond beard, but he thought that this could be shaved off, and he believed a good square chin would be left. He also resolved to have his curly hair clipped short so it would appear straight.

"What about his other features?" he asked.

She gave an affected yawn.

"I'm tired," she said. "I can't imagine any more. I think he may have a mouth and nose like yours."

"And moustache?" he asked.

"I am not quite sure how you would look without a moustache," she replied, in an unguarded moment. "It depends on what sort of a mouth you have."

"This sort!" he said, playing trumps as he kissed her.

"Don't," she exclaimed, "or we can't be friends."

"Do you refuse my love?" he asked.

"How can I refuse something which never has been offered me?" she replied indignantly.

"Has it never been offered?" he inquired wonderingly.

"Not to my knowledge," she replied, as if the matter were one of no particular concern.

"I was not aware of that," he continued. "If it should happen to be so it can be easily remedied."

And it was remedied.

Mabel Trangmar.

"Did she make you feel at home?" "No; but she made me wish I were."

Nellie (aged twelve): "Our family is awfully exclusive. Is yours?" Bessie (aged eleven): "No, indeed! We haven't anything to be ashamed of."

Barber: "How do you prefer to be shaved?" Customer: "On the outside, please." Barber: "Eh?" Customer: "Don't you understand? I don't want you to go beneath the skin."

Mamma: "Yes, the elopers have been discovered in Scotland. They are going to telegraph home for forgiveness." Papa: "Thank goodness! I thought they were going to telegraph home for funds."

Young Mistress: "I don't see why you should leave me so suddenly. I'm sure I've done all I could to help you with the housework, and I've done all the cooking." Maid: "Yes'm; that's what's the matter." "What?" "I can't stand y'r cooking."

Your Editor Chats.

Nobody, I think, will deny that the cover illustration of this week's number is an exceptionally strong one, and neither ought anybody to be disappointed with the story of which it is the subject. I believe my readers fully appreciate the efforts I am making to keep this paper first and foremost, as it always has been since its birth, in the ranks of light literature, but I am always delighted to read criticisms from any of the thousands who regularly peruse these pages, because it is very helpful for me to know your opinions. So when you have a moment to spare, do me a favour, will you? Just take a postcard and on it express in a few words exactly what you feel about the new development of our striking covers, or the general style of the paper, or about any of its contents. Perhaps there is a new feature you would like to see started? If so, name your idea, and I will give my very best attention to see what can be done in the matter.

Next week the concluding episodes of "The 'Bridge' of Ruin" will appear, and I am positive that my readers, both male and female, will deem them to be a fitting climax to an exceptionally interesting series of confessions. If, as possibly they may, they have influenced anyone to steer clear of the vice of gambling, especially as regards that one from which is fascinating Society so much at present, the game of Bridge, I shall consider myself doubly satisfied, insomuch that I have provided my readers with entertaining matter, and have also perhaps staved them off from the whirlpool surrounding the green card-table.

Now, in the issue dated October 17th, commences a series after your own heart, a series over which, I believe, you will go into raptures. I am sure that my policy of discovering young ladies and of inducing them to write about their own romantic experiences is a very much appreciated one, because then my readers know that the details are both true and realistic. In my next chat I will tell you the heroine's name, and also about a coming grand new serial from the pen of your favourite author, Mr. George Griffith.

I wish everyone who reads this page would do me a favour. It is but a small matter, though it would give me great satisfaction. All I want you to do is to tell as many people as you can about the coming grand, new stories. By doing so you will oblige me, and you will earn the thanks of your friends. If you give them a copy of the paper, the bright reading matter will do the rest.

The result of the "Juggled Letters" Competition I hope to announce next week.

Your Editor.

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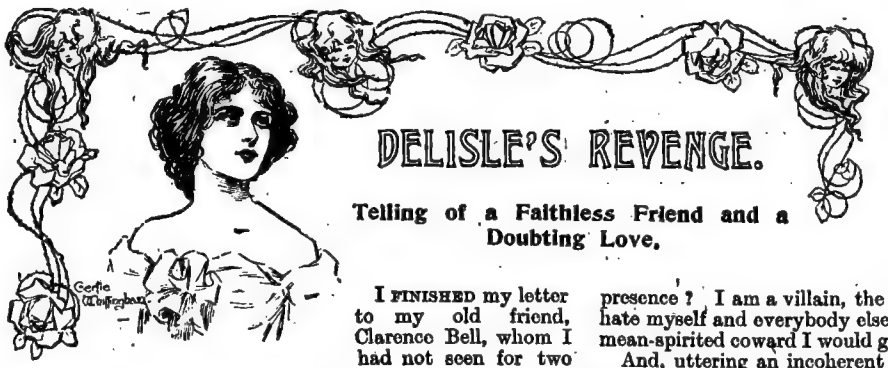

DELISLE'S REVENGE.

Telling of a Faithless Friend and a Doubting Love.

I FINISHED my letter to my old friend, Clarence Bell, whom I had not seen for two years, with the following paragraph:

I wish you could see Gladys. Beautiful is not an adequate word for such a face as hers. I cannot describe her to you, for I should utterly fail to convey to you her sweetness and purity.

One morning, a few days later, the door of my office opened and Clarence entered, cool, careless, handsome as of old—the same Clarence who had ruled me by the charm of his presence, laughed at me, and borrowed my money during our college days.

"You did not expect me?" he said, after I had warmly welcomed him. "The fact is, Delisle, your letter aroused my curiosity. In the first place, I don't believe half of it, mind; but, allowing even for a lover's exaggeration, you have apparently found a jewel, eh? What is her name?"

"Gladys Lorimer."

"Her age?"

"Twenty, with soft, dark eyes and rich, red-brown hair."

"Perfection!" he exclaimed, laughing in his half-mocking way. "I perceive that I shall envy you."

"It will do credit to your taste," I replied. "However, you shall judge for yourself. She expects me this evening. Come with me and prepare to admire." He came.

I was proud of my friend, with his handsome face and winning manner.

And how beautiful she was, in her white summer dress, with her favourite scarlet flowers in her bosom, and a delicate flush in her cheeks as she rose to welcome us!

I saw Clarence start as he beheld her, and a look of undisguised wonder and admiration displace his ordinary careless expression. Contrary to his usual habit, he talked but little, keeping his eyes fastened upon Gladys, as if fascinated.

When we left her, he walked beside me in silence for some time. Suddenly he drew a deep breath, and said, as if to himself:

"She is a revelation!"

"Is she not!" I exclaimed triumphantly. "Am I not a fortunate fellow to have won her love?"

"Her love!" he repeated absently. "She loves *you?* True," he added, bursting into a laugh, "I had forgotten. I congratulate you, Delisle; you are indeed the most fortunate of men. You wanted me to envy you, and I do with all my heart. A man might give his right arm, his life even, to be in your place. There; am I sufficiently enthusiastic?"

He relapsed into silence, and during the rest of the evening remained moody and abstracted.

If love is blind, friendship is certainly near-sighted. During the three weeks that followed, if anyone had told me that my dearest friend was revolving in his mind the basest injury one man can do another, or that the woman I loved in the deepest fibre of my heart was being slowly but irresistibly drawn away from her plighted faith, I should have laughed the story to scorn.

There was no leaven of doubt in my love for them both, nor any shadow upon my happiness.

I had indeed observed a change in Clarence Bell. He was no longer the careless, idle friend of former times. He had become restless, gloomy and irritable. From visiting Gladys with me almost daily, he refused to see her at all.

"Let me alone," he said almost savagely, when I had repeated my customary invitation one evening. "Why do you persist in tempting me to contaminate that pure girl with my presence? I am a villain, the worst of villains, I tell you; I hate myself and everybody else; and if I were anything but a mean-spirited coward I would go and drown myself."

And, uttering an incoherent imprecation, he rushed out of the room, leaving me in the fear that he had lost his senses.

I was destined to receive a second surprise the same evening. Gladys was in the habit of waiting for me in the garden, but to-night she was nowhere to be seen. I went through the grounds, looking for her in our accustomed haunts, until I reached a rustic pavilion at the further side. Parting the leaves before the door, I peered cautiously within. She was there, but her attitude startled me. She was sitting with her head resting on the table before her, her face buried in her handkerchief, sobbing convulsively.

She rose hastily as I entered and looked at me confusedly.

"Is it you?" she said, in a tone almost of alarm.

"Whom did you expect?" I responded, in astonishment; "and why are you weeping?"

She sank down again, and put her hand to her side, as if to still the throbbing of her heart.

"Yes, I expected you," she murmured; "I don't know what is the matter with me. I am nervous and ill."

But I was not satisfied; an indefinable uneasiness disturbed me. I passed my arm around her, and putting aside the fallen tresses of her hair, looked at her earnestly and said:

"You are suffering, darling, will you not tell me what it is?"

"Nothing, nothing," she replied, averting her face. "I am only unhappy, that is all."

"Shall I leave you?" I asked, hurt at her manner. "I will come another time."

"No, no," she cried hysterically, clasping me tightly; "do not leave me. I dare not stay alone. I feel as if I were being drawn away from you by a power over which I have no control, as if I were under an evil spell."

"Everybody seems unhappy to-day," I replied. "I left poor Clarence in a desperate mood. I would have brought him with me, but he was nowhere to be found."

She started to her feet and pushed me from her with a shudder.

"Do not bring him here again," she exclaimed passionately. "Do not speak his name to me again."

"What has the poor fellow been doing now?" I asked in surprise. "He has not been here lately, at least."

"You do not know," she gasped, as if making a violent effort. "He comes when you are not here. He is a traitor, and your enemy. Avoid him! drive him away! As you value your peace of mind and mine, protect me from him."

Before I could reply, she lifted her skirts, and fled across the lawn, leaving me stunned and amazed with what I had heard.

There was a dreadful significance in her incoherent words. Was my friend indeed untrue to me? Had he secretly endeavoured to undermine me in the affections of my betrothed? Was *that* the secret of his strange conduct of late? My soul revolted at the idea! I could not believe that the friend to whom I had been so loyal and true would seek to do me so terrible an injury. There must be some mistake, some misapprehension. I would have an explanation from Clarence and give him an opportunity of clearing himself.

I returned to my house, and went to his room, but he was not there. I sat down to wait for him; but as the moments

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passed a nameless anxiety, almost terror, crept upon me, until at the end of the hour I could bear it no longer.

I rose, resolving to go back to Gladys, and to postpone my interview with Clarence until the following morning.

Passing up the main avenue of the grounds surrounding the home, I caught the glimmer of her white dress in the adjacent shrubbery, and turned aside to meet her. As I drew near I discovered that she was not alone; another step, and I recognised her companion. It was Clarence Bell!

My first sensation was mere wonder; the next, a cold chill of terrible doubt—doubt of both of them. I instinctively concealed myself behind a hedge, and waited for them to approach.

As they came nearer I saw—and I seemed to be in the midst of some mad nightmare as I saw it—that his arm was about her waist and her hand lying in his.

I rubbed my eyes and looked again. Yes, it was indeed so. I was deceived by my friend and betrayed by my betrothed wife!

I caught at the slender twigs of the hazels to support myself, for the sky seemed to be reeling above me and the earth to be sinking beneath my feet. Before that moment I did not know that a man could endure such suffering and still live.

Presently the convulsion passed, and there was nothing left in my heart but a consuming hatred.

As they came towards me, I watched them with eyes starting from my head. I heard his low, tender tones and her smothered replies. False lover and faithless friend!

I saw his arm around the waist of my betrothed, and they were talking in low, tender tones.

"It is too late to repent," he was saying, "I loved you from the moment I saw you. It was useless to combat it. I have as much right to be happy as he."

"*I* shall never be happy again," she replied, in a broken voice. "He was so good and true, and he loved me so tenderly. "It will break his heart. I wish I were dead—I wish I were dead!"

"He was my friend, too," he responded; "but love is stronger than friendship."

"And stronger than manhood, honour, and truth, too," I interrupted in a loud, stern voice, stepping from my concealment and confronting them. "Look at me, both of you—the man whose heart you have broken, whose life you have crushed!—and may the memory of me stand between you and accuse you, day and night, to the end of your lives!"

Then, without heeding her wild, supplicating cry, or his hoarse exclamation of shame and terror, I sprang over the hedge and rushed away like a madman.

I have but an indistinct idea of what I did or where I went all that long, terrible night, until at daylight I found myself, torn, haggard, drenched with rain and tottering with fatigue, before my own door.

But out of all my mental chaos I had evolved one clear, relentless resolve—revenge!

I made my way mechanically to my room, and there, upon my dressing-case, found two notes awaiting me.

One was from Clarence, brief, shameless, desperate.

It ran:

"I have deceived you. I have robbed you of your betrothed wife. I have played the scoundrel. Well, I have no excuse to offer. I love her, and have inspired her with a fancy, if no more, for me. It suffices, however. We have taken the morning boat to Castletown, where we shall be married."

The other from Gladys, a blotted, tear-stained sheet, was so confused and rambling that I could only decipher a few sentences.

"Oh! forgive me, if you can," she said, "for I am as wretched as you could wish me to be. I am all that is wicked and false; for I love you yet, and do not love him. But I am drawn on by an irresistible impulse, I do not understand myself. I——"

And here the letter broke off suddenly. I threw the notes down scornfully, and, opening a drawer, drew forth a revolver and loaded it carefully.

I examined the time-table, and made my preparations for the terrible task I had set myself with the cool deliberation of a maniac. I knew that the boat would touch at Rockampton, at the harbour's mouth, four hours later, and that by taking the train I should be able to intercept it.

My plan was terribly simple. I would destroy them both, and then myself. As I could not die alone and leave them to be happy in their treachery, so I could not live after I had meted out to them their fitting punishment. When I had once arrived at this determination my agitation left me. My nerves seemed made of ice and my muscles of steel.

No one aboard the train could have guessed that the quiet passenger who sat by himself in a corner was bent upon a mission of death.

When I reached Rockampton the steamer was already at the wharf. A storm had been raging all the morning, and

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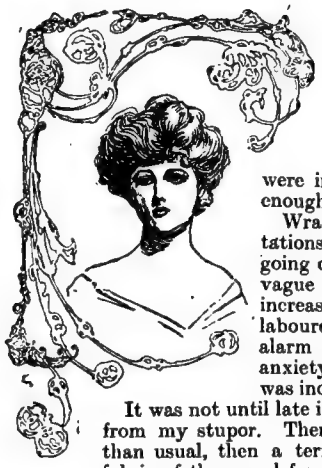

now a terrific gale was blowing across the waste of turbulent water. Muffled in my overcoat, with my hat drawn over my eyes, I made my way aboard. I did not look for those I was pursuing. I knew that they were in my hand, and that was enough until my time should come.

Wrapped in my own stern meditations, I paid no heed to what was going on about me. I knew, in a vague way, that the gale was increasing; that the steamer laboured heavily; that there was alarm among the passengers and anxiety among the officers. But I was indifferent to it all.

It was not until late in the day that I was aroused from my stupor. There had been a heavier lurch than usual, then a terrific crash that shook the fabric of the vessel from end to end.

I rose and went forward, the one calm being among the panic-stricken crowd. I found that in the heavy fog the ship had lost her course, and, striking upon a shoal, was fast going to pieces.

Amid the running to and fro, the shouts, cries and agonies of terror, I saw and thought of nothing but the two figures standing side by side near the bow—Gladys and Clarence.

I watched them awhile, with a smile of scorn upon my lips and a cold, deadly calm at my heart. My hand would not be raised in punishment; my revenge would be consummated by a power greater than mine. Moment after moment passed by, and the water was already creeping about my feet; in less than half an hour all would be over.

Suddenly, as if my fixed gaze had fascinated her, Gladys raised her head and saw me. Even in the wild uproar I heard her cry of mingled shame, terror and love. Instinctively she stretched out her hands towards me, with a piteous gesture of appeal. In an instant all my hatred was swept out my heart, and all my love, betrayed as it had been, returned.

I pushed my way through the crowd and stood before them. I took her cold hand in mine; I turned and looked him calmly in the face.

"I followed you," I said, "to destroy you both for the wrong you have done me, and to die myself. In this hour, which may indeed be our last, I forgive you freely. If we escape, go your way together in peace, and I will go mine."

"No, no," she cried, clinging to me, "take me with you. Despise me, kill me if you wish, but do not believe I love anyone but you. I was mad, deluded, sinful, but in my heart true to you always."

"Say no more," I replied gently; "we have no time to think of that now. Clarence Bell, if you are a man, help me to save this woman."

"I cannot swim a stroke," he answered sullenly.

"Then I must save you both," I said. "The shore is not far distant, and I am a strong swimmer. Gladys, come with me. Clarence, remain where you are; I will return for you."

My preparations were soon made. I threw off my superfluous clothing, drew off her shoes and wraps, and bound a handkerchief over her mouth. Then, taking her in my arms, I sprang overboard, and began the terrible journey shoreward.

The sea was running mountains high and the wind was full in my face. The shore was less than half a mile distant, but in that short space I was more than once on the point of giving up my efforts.

But I was labouring for a life far more dear than my own, and I struggled on. At length, faint and gasping, I was drawn, with my precious burden, out of the seething billows upon the land. Waiting only long enough to regain my breath, I plunged into the water again and swam back to the wreck.

When I reached it again only a small portion of it was left. Clinging to a broken timber, in stolid despair, I found Clarence Bell.

"I did not believe you would return," he said, looking at me in haggard amazement. "Are you more than a man that you should risk your life for one who has injured you as I have?"

"This is my revenge," I replied. "Good for evil; life for worse than death."

He uttered a groan, and covered his face with his hands.

The renewed struggle was indeed a hopeless one. Wearied by my previous efforts, with a heavier and quite as helpless a burden to support, I believed from the start that we were doomed.

For more than half an hour I laboured desperately on, till I could scarcely move my cramped limbs. My eyes were blinded with spray, and my breath came in groans. Finally, I felt my senses leaving me.

"I can do no more," I gasped; "I am sinking!"

My arms relaxed, and I floated helpless at the mercy of the waves.

"You are dying for me," he moaned; "and I—oh, God! Claud, forgive——"

A swell passed over his head and he disappeared. The next instant I became unconscious.

* * * ** *

An age seemed to have elapsed, when I became vaguely aware of a sense of great pain, and the sound of a woman's voice in prayer.

"Oh, Father in Heaven! spare him to me" it said—"spare him that he may at length forgive me for my sin, and take me back to that noble heart which I betrayed!"

"Gladys!" I murmured, stretching out my hand feebly towards her.

"He lives!" she cried, falling upon her knees beside the bed, and covering my hand with kisses. "Oh, it is more than I deserve!"

"Hush!" I said gently; "don't speak of that now. Tell me of Clarence."

"He still lives," she answered, averting her face; "but it is said that he was mortally injured by a piece of wreck and will die. He has asked to see you."

He was lying in the next room, conscious of his approaching fate, desiring only to see me before he died.

On the following morning I was able to get to his bedside. Battered, dying, with the last vestige of his once wonderful beauty gone, he was indeed a sorrowful sight.

"They tell me that my time is up," he said feebly, trying to smile; "and I am heartily glad of it. You can forgive me now, can you not, old friend?"

"Fully and freely, before Heaven," I replied solemnly.

"You used to say no woman could resist me," he continued, with a momentary flash of his old, mocking manner. "I tempted, deluded, fascinated her; but under it all she was true to you. During our journey on the steamer she came to her senses. She loathed me, and did not disguise it. She would never have married me, and what would have been the sequel I cannot guess, but for the providential storm that killed me and restored her to you unharmed. Forgive her, Claud. She loves you, and has never ceased to love you."

"I have forgiven her," I said, "as I have forgiven you."

With a faint smile, in which there lingered something of the gay, careless friend I had known and loved so long, he closed his eyes, and so I left him.

His death drew the last bitter sting from my heart, but it was months before the memory of that sad time faded to a plaintive dream. Even then, with my love strengthened and my faith renewed, it was long before the prospect of happiness was again opened to me.

The folly I had pardoned, Gladys could not forgive in herself. She was not worthy of such love as mine, she said. It was fitting she should pass the rest of her life in the hard penance of self-denial and regret.

But we were both young, and love conquered with her as it had with me, as in all true hearts, though tears and fire, sorrow and shame, intervene, it reaches that union which is a foretaste of Heaven.

Charles Hildreth.

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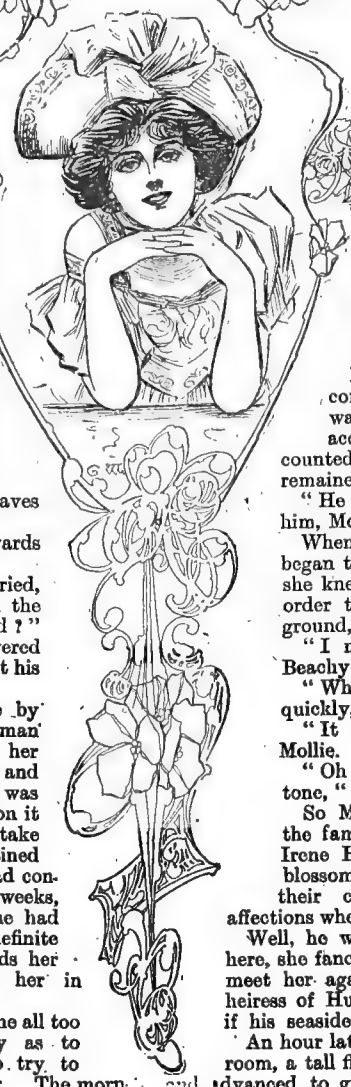
A Seaside Flirtation.



A Tale of Envy and Love.

It was late in the summer, nearing the end of September, and Mollie Armstrong was thinking regretfully that in another week she would have left the gay little seaside resort where she and her father had come for a change and be back once more in the quiet rectory at home.

This morning, having left her father busy over his correspondence and having no definite plans to put into execution, Mollie strolled down to the beach, and, seating herself on a breakwater, idly watched the waves coming in.

Presently a tall young man sauntered towards her.

"Good-morning, Miss Armstrong," he cried, raising his hat. "I've been looking for you in the gardens. Won't you come in and hear the band?"

"Yes, I should like to, very much," answered Mollie, as Charlie Maitland came up and held out his hand to help her to rise.

As they walked down the promenade side by side, Mollie smiled quietly to herself, but the man with her did not see the smile nor guess at her thoughts. She was thinking what a flirt he was, and wondering how much or how little his heart was touched this time. She came to the conclusion it was just as well she had hitherto declined to take his attentions seriously. Only a few days remained now before her departure and Mr. Maitland had constituted himself her devoted cavalier for several weeks, but in spite of compliments and attentions he had spoken no word that could be construed into a definite declaration. And yet his whole bearing towards her was such as might easily have justified her in anticipating one.

The last day of her visit to Beachy-at-Cliff came all too soon, and Mollie felt some little curiosity as to whether Maitland would make any effort to try to see her in the future or at least to write to her. The morning drew on to afternoon and he arrived at the station to see her and the Rector off, with a bunch of flowers in his hand, which he offered to her as a parting greeting.

"I hope we shall meet again before long," Charlie Maitland said, pressing her hand, while Mollie reflected that under the circumstances it would be the merest chance if they did.

The train steamed out of the station as he stood on the platform a moment, waving his hat to her, but he had turned away long ere she was borne out of sight.

Mollie watched his fast-diminishing figure. "A flirt!" she said to herself, bending over the flowers. "Well, I am glad I had the sense to recognise it." And she asked herself whether on her part she had been altogether guiltless of flirtation?

* * * * *

Summer had gone and autumn was being merged in winter. It was November; a drear month truly, but Mollie Armstrong, in the stately old Yorkshire mansion of her friends the Hursts, felt both gay and cheerful. She had just arrived on a long-promised visit, and she and Irene Hurst were now busy chatting in the latter's boudoir, previous to descending to dinner.

"Mr. Maitland is coming to-night," said Irene. "I do want you to see him, he is quite an intimate friend of ours, you know."

Mr. Maitland! Mollie preserved her composure and gave no sign that the name was familiar to her. A summer holiday's acquaintance formed at a boarding-house counted for nothing, she decided, so she remained silent while Irene went on:

"He brings his brother sometimes; you'd like him, Mollie, he's quite your style."

When Irene mentioned a brother, Mollie began to wonder which of the two it was that she knew, and with a view of finding out in order that she might feel more sure of her ground, presently she remarked carelessly:

"I met a Mr. Maitland these holidays at Beachy; I wonder if it is the same?"

"Which did you meet?" asked Irene quickly, "Charlie or Guy?"

"It was a Mr. Charlie Maitland," answered Mollie.

"Oh!" said Irene, in a slightly disappointed tone, "that is the one we know best!"

So Mr. Charlie Maitland was the friend of the family at Hurst Dene! Mollie looked at Irene Hurst with her golden hair and peach-blossom complexion and wondered whether their charm had succeeded in riveting his affections where her own attractions had failed.

Well, he would be somewhat surprised to see her here, she fancied; no doubt he had never expected to meet her again and if he were paying court to the heiress of Hurst Dene, he might not be best pleased if his seaside flirtation became known.

An hour later as the two girls entered the drawing-room, a tall figure came out of a corner by the window and advanced to greet them. He shook hands with Irene and she presented him to Mollie: "Mr. Guy Maitland—Miss Armstrong."

Mollie looked up with interest, and if ever there was a case of love at first sight it flashed into his eyes as they met hers, and Mollie, without knowing why, suddenly felt a strange shyness come over her.

"So your brother has not come, Mr. Maitland," said Irene, and a close observer might have noticed a shade of disappointment in her voice.

"No, he was unfortunately prevented," answered Guy, "and deputed me to utter his keen regrets." Bending a look on Irene, he saw the blush he had half anticipated colour her cheeks at his concluding words.

The evening passed pleasantly. Mollie played and sang, and Guy Maitland lingered at her side as if he asked nothing better. When, some hours later, Mollie found herself in her own room she threw herself into a luxurious armchair, feeling her heart stirred as it had never been before. She had met her fate! At last he had become a reality! And oh! surely he

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loved her too, incredible as it might seem in the short space of time. He was cast in a different mould from his brother, she felt convinced, or did her love blind her? No, she must not give her love lightly. But how if it were already given beyond recall.

* * * * *

The next night Charlie and Guy Maitland both came to dinner at Hurst Dene.

Charlie seemed markedly pleased to meet Mollie again, and somewhat to her surprise there was no alteration in his manner to her of a few months back. Mollie was a little at a loss, for from one or two chance remarks Irene had let fall and a blush here and there, she had imagined there might be something in that quarter. But she certainly had no clue to the fact that Irene had refused Charlie just before he came to Beachy, nor did she guess that he might be trying to annoy her by bestowing his attentions on another.

But to-night Irene seemed quite preoccupied with Guy, and Mollie could not help feeling a slight twinge of the green-eyed monster as she looked across at them. Guy in his turn sent many a glance in her direction and felt irritated to note, judging from the talk and laughter, that she and Charlie were meeting on the ground of old acquaintances. It suddenly occurred to Guy, who well knew his brother's secret, that Mollie might take his attentions seriously. Lots of people preferred Charlie to himself, and if Mollie—heavens! how he loved her already!

All that evening Guy tried hard to get Mollie to himself if only for a minute, and invariably Charlie circumvented him. The two brothers hovered round Mollie's chair, talking to her, amusing her, and persistently glancing at one another. Mollie was amused at the comedy and was quite quick enough to see that while Charlie appeared to be whispering soft nothings into her ear, his eyes betrayed themselves by constantly sending messages of quite another sort in Irene's direction. That demure maiden would not encounter one of them, so engrossed did she appear to be in a game of chess with her father.

At last, when the whole party made a general move to break up, Mollie found herself momentarily deserted by Charlie. That was Guy's chance and he immediately possessed himself of it.

"Don't you think we have had an awfully slow evening compared with last night?" he said. "My brother is a little apt, you know, to force his attentions on people. Of course, Irene, being an old friend, forgives him a good deal of his nonsense, but you must not take him too literally."

"Now he is jealous," thought Mollie, with a thrill of conquest; but loud she said quietly: "I think you do your brother an injustice." Guy looked at her in silence.

"Is she in love with him already?" he asked himself.

* * * * *

Irene and Mollie were exchanging confidences, and the conversation had naturally turned on the Maitland brothers. Charlie's tactics were already producing the desired result. Irene, in spite of herself, was beginning to feel a little jealous of Mollie and to find the thought that she might perhaps plume herself on a double conquest rather trying. Still, she did not believe that Charlie had really so far faltered in his allegiance as to be in earnest, but Mollie, who knew nothing of what had gone before, might believe him to be, and Irene felt the time had come to say a word in season.

"Charlie and Guy are too funny, don't you think?" she observed. "Directly Guy admires anyone Charlie must come and interfere, and it's the same the other way round. Because Charlie met you at Beachy, Guy immediately jumps to the conclusion he is in love with you—ridiculous, isn't it?—and must try to cut him out. Guy is always playing that game. You never heard the story about Julia Roberts? But I must say that Guy was right there for she was ten years older than Charlie. But Charlie always declared he would pay Guy out for it."

As may be imagined this speech was a revelation to Mollie and opened her eyes very considerably. Like a flash it dawned on her. Charlie was pretending love to her to pique Irene, so much she had guessed herself. On her own part she knew that she was permitting his attentions to cover her preference for Guy. And Guy? Guy was making love to her to spite his brother or for private reasons of his own. Oh! it was cruel, cruel! But she quite grasped the situation now and would never let Irene or anyone guess how utterly she had been deluded!

And Irene chatted on, little dreaming of the havoc she had wrought, and went to bed to sleep the sleep of the just, satisfied that she had made it clear to Mollie that Charlie Maitland was her special property, to be resumed at will, when she so pleased.

* * * * *

An impromptu dance suggested by Irene and indulgently assented to by the Squire and Mrs. Hurst, was taking place at Hurst Dene. Mollie was sitting in a secluded corner with Charlie Maitland, while the band played that most seductive of waltzes, "The Blue Danube." Mollie moved impatiently as the young man bent his dark eyes upon her. She was feeling worried and unhappy, tired of his make-believe which she seemed powerless to evade, and longing for the next dance on her programme when Guy would be her partner. Charlie bent nearer to her, how near she did not know, for a dark shadow fell across the portière and she leant forward ever so slightly. The kiss that would have brushed her cheek fell on a little curl that was straying out from behind her ear, and before she had time to give her wrath utterance, Guy's deep voice was heard apologising for disturbing them.

"Awfully sorry to intrude," he said, with a fierce look at his brother, which belied his words. He offered his arm to Mollie. "Our dance, I think." She rose and accepted it, and together they moved away.

Charlie remained standing alone, hiding a smile as he pulled at his moustache.

"Guy is in deadly earnest at last! I wonder how he liked being cooped up behind the portière, obliged to listen to my pretty speeches, got up for his benefit. It's too bad of me, I declare, but then I owed him one over the Roberts affair—I was hard hit at the time. And he's no right to take me to task about Irene. I don't believe she cares two straws for me, less, in fact, than Miss Armstrong does, and anyone can see where her choice has fallen. But I'll ask Irene again!"

* * * * *

As they walked away together Guy's dark head was close to Mollie's, and he whispered:

"Don't let us dance. Do sit here a little while; I want to talk to you, Mollie! I must speak to you while I can. You must have guessed how I love you! And I cannot control my feelings any longer. Do give me one little word of hope."

Mollie drew herself coldly away, afraid to believe in his words. "I don't understand you, Mr. Maitland, you must be making a mistake." He looked quickly at her to read her meaning, drew a long breath, and remained silent.

Suddenly voices near by arrested their attention. Irene exclaimed: "Oh, Charlie, I am so happy. I was beginning to think that—that——"

And Charlie answered reproachfully:

"There's only one girl in the world for me, darling, and that's your sweet self."

Mollie made a movement to go but Guy for some inexplicable reason detained her—why he could not tell.

"You see," went on Irene, "it's really a matter of difficulty to tell when you and Guy are in earnest. You so often only pay attention to a girl to spite each other. And I told Mollie so!"

"But Guy is in deadly earnest," exclaimed Charlie. "Whatever did Miss Armstrong say? Perhaps after the way you libelled me to her, she is under the impression Guy is only trying to cut me out. Whew!"

At this point Mollie would have fled away in deepest confusion but Guy's hand clasped hers.

"Is that what you thought?"

Her eyes filled with tears as she struggled to escape. "Yes," she acknowledged, "I thought it."

"Mollie, Mollie," he cried, "believe that I love you!"

And as he was in a position to enforce his words she yielded to them.

Ellice Beere.

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Might Try the Same Game.

Miss Peart: "Do you think one is liable to catch anything from kissing?" Mrs. Placid: "That's the way I caught my husband."

She Wasn't the Only Pebble.

She: "If I refuse you, I suppose you'll do some foolish thing or other." He: "Oh, yes; no doubt I'll go and marry some other girl, most likely."

And Hubby Scored.

Wife: "You can't say I ran after you before we were married." Husband: "H'm: The trap doesn't run after the mouse, but it gets him in all the same!"

He'd Sooner Not Say.

She: "Oh, yes, I quite believe there's a fool in every family. Don't you?" He: "Well-er my opinion's rather biassed. You see, I'm the only member of our family."

Did He Do It?

She: "You say you would do anything for me, Charlie." He (fervently): "I would, darling." She: "Well, you know how frightfully red my hair is, I want you to dye yours red, just to keep me in countenance!"

George Would Pay No Parson's Fees.

Laura: "I don't know, George, it seems such a solemn thing to marry. Have you counted the cost?" George: "The cost, Laura? The cost? Bless me, I've got a clergyman cousin that'll marry us for nothing!"

A Clear Course Open for Him.

Old Richfellow (desperately): "If you refuse me what is there left for me to do?" Sweet Girl: "Well, I read the other day about a rich man who made his will in favour of the woman who refused him, and then went and hanged himself."

She Was Engaged at Last.

Mr. Beetleson: "Would you like the date put in our engagement ring, dear?" Miss Beryl: "By all means; and then if there's room, run in some little motto like 'Any port in a storm,' or 'A bird in the hand,' or something pretty like that, you know."

Suited Both Reasonings.

"I wish you would give me that gold ring on your finger," said the village dandy to a country girl, "for it resembles the duration of my love for you—it has no ending." "Excuse me, sir. I chose to keep it as emblematic of my love for you—it has no beginning."

She Had Made a Start.

He (accepted): "You say you were never engaged before?" She: "Yes." He: "How does that happen? I thought all women usually had three or four engagements?" She (guilelessly): "Well, I presume I shall, too. You see, this is the first chance I've had."

Was Her Reply Encouraging?

He: "Will you marry me if I ask your father?" She: "Yes, if you don't get disfigured too badly."

He Didn't Dispair.

Dasher: "Clara, dear, will you be my wife?" Clara: "Have you asked mamma?" Dasher: "Yes; but she won't have me."

Popping the Question Artfully.

Edgar: "You wear pink all the time; I should like to see you in a lace-like white frock." Ethel: "How awfully—awfully sudden."

A Successful Marriage.

Wise Father (to married son): "You are living very nicely, I see; but are you saving any money?" Wise Son (whispering): "Yes, but don't tell my wife."

Not Finally Rejected.

De Long: "Your daughter, sir, has declined me with thanks. She is literary, you know, and she says she is in need of shorter articles." Paterfamilias: "Um! Couldn't you get her to accept you as a serial?"

They Don't Speak Now.

Ella: "Pa says we can't marry for ten years. But don't look so sad, George; you are yet young." George: "Yes, I know I am, dearest. I wasn't thinking of myself, but of you, love." It was at once put off indefinitely.

A Great Shame.

Chappie: "I knelt befoah her, and asked her to be my wife." Chollie: "And she wejected you?" Chappie: "Yaas." Chollie: "That was wough." Chappie: "Yaas. I got my twousahs bagged at the knees for nothing, bah Jove!"

The Joys of Marriage.

"If I had known," sobbed young Mrs. Fits, "that you would be such a brute to poor Fido, I never, never would have married you." "My dear," replied Mr. Fits, "the anticipation of kicking that miserable little beast was one of my chief reasons for proposing to you."

Not Difficult to Believe.

"Your father is worth at least a million," said Hunter to his jealous sweetheart. "Yes, he is," she replied. "And you are his only child!" he impressively said. "I am;" she responded. "And yet you doubt my love," he cried, in tones of blended satire and sorrow.

She Rather Liked It.

Daughter: "What do you think, mamma! That strange gentleman who just got out when we were going through the tunnel kissed me!" Mother: "But, my child, why didn't you tell me at once, so that I could call him to account for it?" Daughter: "Why, you see, mamma, I thought—I thought—that we were coming to another tunnel!"

She Helped Him On.

Bashful Bachelor: "My dearest, I—I have long wished to tell you that I am full—I mean my heart is full—my palpitating heart—I—I mean your smiles—dearest, would shed—would shed——" Aspiring Maiden: "Perhaps, dear, we could live in a flat at first, and then we should not need a wood-shed." (The all important date was settled in five minutes.)

A Foregone Conclusion.

"Now, Algernon," said Miss Fussanfeather, as she was tightly held in the embrace of her *fiancé*, "they tell me that men get tired of squeezing after they are married. Will you promise me not to give it up after we are man and wife?" "Oh, I assure you it is not necessary to make any such promises," replied the young man. "I guarantee you'll have all the squeezing you want to get along on thirty shillings a week."

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A Forced Engagement.

The Story of a Lover's Stratagem.

THERE was some consternation in the village of Reynsham when it was known that Joe Warner, the gamekeeper, had not returned to his lonely cottage. He had gone out as usual, and no one had anticipated any scrimmage with a poacher, yet Warner had not returned at the ordinary hour in the morning.

An affray with poachers was such an out-of-the-way occurrence on Lord Mensem's estate, that the mere mention of such a thing provoked a smile; therefore the notion that Warner had been hurt in a scrimmage was dismissed at once as improbable.

Some accident had befallen him, the villagers agreed, and they made up a search party to scour the woods.

Annie Rawson looked up with a startled glance when a neighbour entered her mother's humble dwelling with the intelligence that a search in the woods was to be made in order to find Joe Warner, and her face grew pale as she listened to the scanty information.

"I'm sorry to be bringing you bad news, Annie," concluded the neighbour with assumed sympathy. In truth, she was proud of being the first to acquaint the girl with what was supposed to have happened. "Perhaps there's nothing in it, and Joe'll be coming home and laughing at us all for being so foolish! I thought I'd better come and tell you before someone else broke it to you rough-like!"

Annie laughed uneasily.

"Perhaps he has gone off somewhere before going home," she observed quietly. "There does not seem to be any cause for alarm."

"That's just as you may like to think," answered the old woman sharply. "If he had had a quarrel with anyone he might go off in a huff, but it takes a lot to make Joe Warner go out of his way. I'll be going now, Mrs. Rawson," she concluded, turning to Annie's mother, who had not said a word, and ignoring Annie.

She left the cottage, and Annie turned a troubled gaze towards her mother.

"Do you think that anything has happened?" she asked, with just a quiver in her voice.

"Yes!" said Mrs. Rawson slowly. "It isn't like Joe's style to act like that. Did you quarrel with him last night, Annie?"

"Yes, mother."

"You have agreed to marry him, yet——" began Mrs. Rawson, but her daughter interrupted her.

"I agreed to marry him and I will marry him!" she cried passionately. "But he must take me as I am. He must——" She broke off abruptly. "I don't wish to talk any more about it, mother. Let us go and join in the search."

Mrs. Rawson rose and went into the next room for her bonnet and shawl; the morning was somewhat chilly. Annie surveyed herself in the mirror, mechanically, as she set her hat on the wealth of brown hair.

The reflection was that of a maiden of twenty years, tall and graceful, with a sweetly attractive face, bright eyes that changed in expression with every mood, and rosy lips through which could be seen the faintest glimmer of white teeth.

There was an appearance of resolution in the girl's face that could not be mistaken, but this seemed to add to her beauty rather than detract from it, as is so often the case in woman.

Annie, although her eyes were fastened on the mirror, saw nothing of this, for her thoughts were far away. A curious struggle was going on within her, a struggle between the sentiments of attraction and repulsion.

Joe Warner had forced himself upon her, and had done his best, or worst, to oust his brother. Joe was a quiet, steady fellow, whom everybody regarded as a man of sterling worth and incapable of a mean action; he was six years older than Annie and three years older than his brother. A match between Joe and Annie was not the kind of union that people would anticipate.

Dick Warner was quite unlike his sedate brother; he lived in town and was better dressed, more alert in manner, and more of a ladies' man than Joe, whom he secretly despised. At least, that was the opinion generally held in the village of Reynsham.

It was not surprising that Dick Warner was smitten by the charms of Annie Rawson; indeed, it would have been wonderful if he had not been. And Annie, although not entirely unsophisticated, yielded to his tender glances and honeyed words. It was at this stage that Joe Warner stepped in and won the prize out of his brother's grasp. How?

Annie's face flushed as she remembered how Joe had forced her to become engaged to him, although she favoured the suit of the more stylish and fascinating Dick Warner.

Almost on the eve of an engagement with Dick, the elder brother had called upon her and threatened—yes, threatened—to expose a certain transaction of her dead father.

She did not understand the matter properly, for she was not versed in business, but she grasped enough of the subject to comprehend that it would be a disgrace to her mother and herself if it became known to the world. Joe, in response to her indignant vindication of her father, told her quietly that he could back it up by proof, and she gave in with a sob.

Yes, to save her father's memory and to keep disgrace from her mother, she would marry Joe, although she would hate him as long as she lived. Joe smiled, a quiet smile full of sadness and not at all indicative of triumph, and left her.

Dick Warner received his dismissal in anger; he asked for a reason, but Annie could give him none, save that it was for the best. Dick said afterwards, with perfect frankness, that if she preferred Joe he could not object, and he hoped she would be happy with his brother.

The engagement was only a month old. During that time Joe had been undemonstratively attentive, and Annie had recognised in him certain excellent qualities which did not accord with the part he had played; notwithstanding his cowardly action, he had commanded a certain amount of respect.

"Are you ready, Annie?" came her mother's voice. "I do hope that nothing has happened; but since Mrs. Booth brought the news I have had an uneasy feeling that I remember a shot while I was in a kind of doze last night. Perhaps it's only imagination, but a hazy recollection comes to me!"

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"Do you really think that Joe has had an affray with poachers, mother?" inquired Annie, hurrying to the door in advance of her mother, so that the latter might not see the agitation in her face.

If anything had happened to Joe Warner she was free, and her father's memory was safe. Was it just to permit even the trace of a sentiment of elation at the thought? She shuddered. "Oh, I hope not!" she concluded fervently, her better nature gaining the mastery.

It was strange that such a commotion had arisen because a gamekeeper had failed to return home in the morning; but it was an extraordinary thing in Joe's case, and all the villagers were filled with the same vague unrest. The people set off into the woods in twos and threes; Annie and her mother went by themselves to an especially secluded portion of the estate.

They wended their way here and there, Annie's anxiety increasing without apparent cause as the time passed. Suddenly Mrs. Rawson uttered a cry, and pointed to the foot of a tall oak.

Joe Warner sat at the foot of the tree, his back against the trunk. His head was thrown back against the tree; his hands clasped a gun half-way along the barrel; the butt end of the weapon rested on the ground between his feet, and a piece of twine ran from the trigger to his foot.

Joe Warner had shot himself! That was the first thought that crossed the minds of the two women. Mrs. Rawson hastened forward, and knelt by Joe's side. She placed her cheek close to his lips and remained motionless for a few seconds.

"He is alive!" she cried abruptly and with animation. "Run and tell them, Annie, and bring a doctor."

Annie gave another horrified glance at the motionless figure and was about to dart away for help when a curious, indefinable sentiment impelled her to go forward, kneel near her mother, and kiss the pallid face of the wounded man.

Mrs. Rawson untied the string and put it in her pocket. Then she threw the gun into the bushes.

"'Oh, mother," she burst forth, "has he tried to kill himself because—because he forced me to take his ring, and——?"

"Run for help, quick!" cried Mrs. Rawson sharply. She did not understand her daughter's words. "And don't tell anyone that he had the gun like that! I don't believe in it! Don't forget!"

Annie ran off for assistance, while Mrs. Rawson, with set features, untied the string and hid it in her pocket. Then she took Joe's gun and threw it among the nearest trees. Having accomplished so much, she again knelt by his side, opened his waistcoat, and examined the wound.

"It did not bleed much," she muttered. "The soft shirt seems to have staunched the blood. This has not been done long. No suicide about this, but—an attempt to kill, in my opinion. It was a clever dodge, and the villain will expect to hear that Joe Warner was found in such-and-such a position. He will be amazed when he hears nothing of the kind, but he will not be able to say anything. I must keep my ears wide open. The rascal may let something slip in his surprise and annoyance that will afford a clue!'"

It was not long before help arrived, including the village doctor. Joe's wound was pronounced to be less dangerous than it appeared to be, much to the relief of the inhabitants of Reynsham, and he was borne tenderly, but still unconscious, to his own home.

Annie went with the rough ambulance and assisted Joe's housekeeper to attend to him and make everything comfortable for him. The old woman would have resented it if Mrs. Rawson had done it, but Annie had a right to be by the side of her affianced husband. So she stayed.

The greatest excitement prevailed in Reynsham; there really had been an affray with poachers, then, however improbable it had seemed to the worthy people.

The police were informed, and everyone was waiting for poor Joe Warner to recover consciousness and give some clue to his assailants.

Annie heard of the expectations of the inhabitants and she dreaded the awakening of the man to whom she was engaged; her mother had destroyed the evidence of attempted suicide, but that was to prevent Joe from being punished if he should recover, she thought. Suppose he were to utter some incriminating words before he was fully conscious?

Why had he done it? Was it out of remorse for his conduct towards her? She felt a kind of pity, a sense of grateful clemency springing up within her; he would renounce his intention and allow her to choose freely, keeping to himself the dread secret.

At last he opened his eyes with a long-drawn sigh. Annie waited in a state of feverish anxiety; she longed to be able to give him some sign that should warn him, but the police were represented, and the doctor was there.

Joe gazed about him vacantly and Annie's heart contracted; he would betray himself.

"Am I much hurt?" were his first words.

"Oh!" responded the doctor with grave cheerfulness. "You will soon pull round. Of course you remember how it occurred?"

"Someone fired at me!" returned Joe, after a pause. "I fancied—that I recognised him, but—I can't describe him."

This was rather disappointing to the police, but it was a relief to Annie, although she was convinced that Joe was not telling the truth.

"We mustn't worry him any more," declared the doctor authoritatively. "He will get stronger and then he will be able to tell you."

He asked them to leave, and quitted the house himself shortly afterwards. Annie sat by his bedside; she expected a confession that would make her glad, she longed for Joe to gain strength so that she might know that she was free to marry Dick Warner.

"Annie!"

It was Joe's voice; the girl had fallen into a reverie from which she was aroused with a start.

"Annie, I'm sorry I spoke roughly to you last night," the wounded man proceeded. "It isn't my usual way, but

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youangered me when you told me that you thought twenty times as much of Dick as you did of me!"

His voice wavered; he stopped to regain breath, and the girl dare not trust herself to speak.

"It was hard on me, for I love you a thousand times more than he can, Annie." There was a ring of suppressed passion in the weak voice. "Do you hear that? It cut me to the heart, and I said angry words."

The girl remained silent.

"You hate me, Annie! You hate me, when I would give my life for you any day. Ah, you don't know how I have tried to save you. And now, if I die, I sha'n't be able to save you."

"What do you mean?" The girl's question was sharp and full of wondering surprise. "You tried to kill yourself to save me, yet you say that if you die—— Keep still, Joe, you are wandering in your mind."

"It's false. Who says I tried?"

"You were found propped against the trunk of a tree, holding your gun. Mother and I found you, but we have said nothing." And she told him the circumstance.

"The villain!" he gasped, raising himself on his elbow and falling back with a groan. "He tried to kill me; he thought he had killed me; and he endeavoured to make it appear suicide. Clever, but he *forgot the bullet!* My gun is still loaded, unless he discharged it purposely; and even then, it must be possible for these clever detectives to find the bullet or to prove by the wound that I was shot with a pistol."

He lay panting for a few moments, while Annie looked at him in bewilderment. The housekeeper was out, so she had Joe to herself.

"Who was it?" she asked, and the reply stunned her for the time.

"My brother!"

Annie sank back in her chair limp and inarticulate. Joe fixed his eyes on her; a great resolve settled in them. Speaking in a low tone in order to husband his strength, he told his story steadily.

"My brother was here yesterday. He met me in a quiet spot and said that he was sorry for all the trouble he had caused me. He was glad that I was to marry you, as he was not worthy of you. He was so different from his usual manner, so full of remorse for the past, that I was deceived. He told me that he intended to emigrate and to do better in another country. I believed he was sincere, and we parted like brothers.

"Then, when I saw you last night, I found that he had been to see you in spite of what he said to me; I found that he had been at work again in his underhand way and had tried to make you dislike me all the more. In my annoyance at his treachery, in my vexation at having been fooled, I spoke sharply to you and we quarrelled.

"Yes, we quarrelled because you believed him to be all that is good and you take me to be a mean, despicable rascal, who would force you into a marriage against your will. It surprises you to hear me speak of my brother and his *past*. I have always spoken considerately of him; that is because I would not betray my brother. He took advantage of it. But he has tried to kill me, and it is well that *you*, at least, should know the truth."

Annie Rawson remained in the recumbent position in the chair; her eyes were fixed straight in front of her, but she was listening to every word.

"I went on duty last night," continued Joe, "without fear of any mishap. It was getting light when, as I stood by that tree, I turned and saw a figure levelling a pistol at me. I know who it was. I had no time to make any attempt to save myself. There was a report and I fell. It was my brother who fired at me."

Annie shuddered. Joe noted her ashen face, and continued:

"It is time to tell you why I forced you to give him up. It was to save you from a villain. It was because I loved you so, that I could not endure the thought of your giving yourself to a man who would either desert you very soon or break your heart by his own heartlessness.

"I saw that he was exerting his usual fatal fascination and that you were falling a victim. I knew that you did not care for me; I knew that what I thought of doing would destroy for ever my hope of winning your love—for I had hoped to win it, Annie! But I sacrificed myself for your sake.

"Dick has already broken one woman's heart, and he is a forger. He did it cleverly and escaped his deserts, but I possess the information that would send him to prison. I have kept it secret to spare him the horrors of penal servitude, but if it were known I should be indicted with him and sent to prison as an accessory after the fact. Nevertheless, I ran the risk, because he was my brother.

"Then he came down here and tried to take you. That was more than I could bear. I threatened in my desperation that I would expose him and he laughed at me, saying that I should be punished with him. I would have risked that rather than see you fall a victim, but he artfully got into my room and destroyed the evidence!

"After that, my only course was to use the other method. I hated myself, but it was for your sake. Perhaps I acted foolishly; perhaps there might have been a better way; but I did what I thought was best in my ignorance!

"I tried first of all to persuade you to give up Dick, but you refused. I expected that and it did you credit; you are so true. So I brought pressure to bear on you by telling you something which Dick had told me about your father. I judged that it would have the desired effect.

"Out of regard for your father's memory you yielded, and you did not say a word to your mother. I was glad, for I do not believe a word of it. It was my intention to impose on you till I had got Dick away—away somewhere so that you could not marry him, or else to keep matters hanging on till he tired of you and went to some other woman, I thought I could wear out his patience. So——"

He ceased speaking and Annie turned her eyes, full of tears, towards him. She could not doubt the sincerity of his story; a man in that critical condition does not say what is false. She began to realise his sacrifice.

She recognised the sterling qualities which prompted him to shield his brother and to save her; and even his crude method of doing this service to her by temporarily blackening her father's memory was not inexcusable. He thought it was the only sure way of effecting the purpose, and it was only between themselves. No one else knew it.

It was a cruel blow to her pride that she had been deceived by Dick, and this made her more lenient towards Joe.

"I am sorry," she said simply. And he was satisfied.

They were so intent on their own immediate concerns that they did not hear a slight rustle near the door. It was Mrs. Rawson slipping away, with a hard expression on her lips. She had entered very softly in time to hear Joe's story.

"So he tried to blacken Will's character, eh?" she murmured. "Well, I know enough to send him to pri on for a long term. The piece of string attached to the trigger of the gun is the piece I saw him take from the stool in front of the house when he left Annie yesterday afternoon. I can swear to it, so can Annie when I point something out to her. And we both saw it attached to the gun. There's no escape for him, but shall I——? If he will give me a written denial of that lie, and clear out of the country, I'll let him go so as not to upset Joe and Annie."

Mrs. Rawson left Reynsham next day for London, and when she returned she looked radiant, and as soon as Joe was well enough, she told him in Annie's presence all about her interview with Dick Warner in London and showed him the statement written out by his rascally brother.

"He will leave the country within a week or I'll put the police on his track, and he knows that I mean what I say. Then I made him confess on paper," said Mrs. Rawson.

"I am glad," said Joe, in his grave, simple manner. "Perhaps Annie will learn to like me a little some day."

The girl blushed, and Joe took her in his arms.

G. Hubert.

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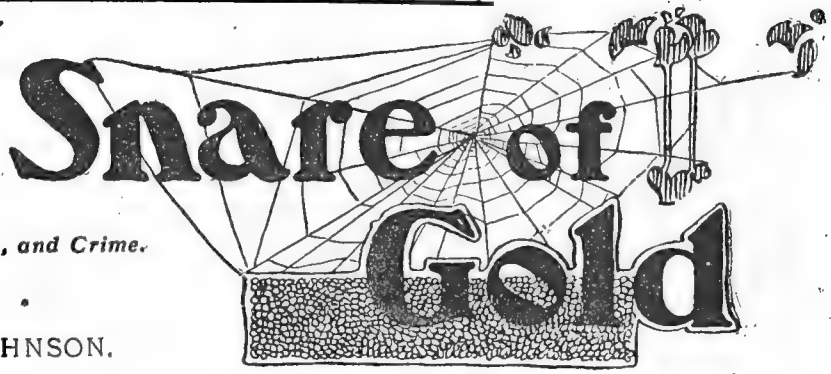
GRAND SERIAL STORY.

The Snare of Gold



A Tale of Love, Ambition, and Crime.

By

HENRY T. JOHNSON.

THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THIS SPLENDID STORY ARE:

GEORGE GELDART, a former prosperous City merchant, supposed to be dead, and now known as "Old Mystery."

ERIC GELDART, his elder son, who conspired to kill his father, thereby coming into his property. He then enters Parliament, where he forms a new party.

RONALD GELDART, the younger son, who has been disinherited because he has been falsely accused of robbing his father.

CLARE ARMITAGE, the adopted sister of the two brothers, and who is betrothed to Eric.

BOANERGES BLAGDON, the traitorous partner of old Geldart, whom he has cheated in business, and who plots with Eric to murder him.

SAMPSON SCRIMSHAW, company promoter, who befriends "Old Mystery," by whose assistance he is successful in endeavouring to become an M.P.

MR. STANYER, an Australian financier, who gives "Old Mystery" the post of English agent for his business.

MADELEINE LORRAINE, daughter of Lord Lynton, who is beloved by Eric, but who loves "Harvey Bligh," the popular author, really Ronald Geldart.

PHYLLIS DAVENTRY, typewriter to Scrimshaw, who takes a fancy to "Old Mystery." She is rescued from Hooligans by Ronald Geldart.

JACK WIDDICOMBE, cousin to the brothers Geldart, and who occupies a responsible position on the *Meteor*.

TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER.

Mr. Springle Does Some Detective Work.

"RONALD! Ronald! Heavens! is it you?"

It was Clare Armitage's voice, it was Clare's hand laid on his arm, and Ronald Geldart, just emerging from the offices of *The Meteor*, paused.

"Clare!" he exclaimed. An impulse possessed him to extend a friendly hand; then he remembered the hard, accusing look she had fixed upon him at their last meeting and their last parting, and the impulse was gone.

Still, rancour was gone from his heart too, for she had greeted him in the old familiar tone, the old smile was on her lips, and then again there were lines in her face and hollows, too, that touched his heart to pity.

"They told me that you were leaving England, that you were gone," she said.

"They told many things regarding me," he answered bitterly, "quite as untrue and infinitely more cruel."

"Yes, yes, I know!"

"You knew they were untrue? Then why did you not speak?"

"Oh, don't ask me; I—I can't tell you now. Only, Ronald, we must meet somewhere, you and I, for a quiet chat; I've a lot to tell you, not here, nor now, my heart is too full. Tell me where you can be found?"

Ronald for a moment hesitated then gave her the address in Bloomsbury Square.

He had that morning arrived in town for the purpose of calling on several publishers with reference to commissions, and also with the intent of booking his passage a few days hence for the States, whither he was bound on a trip partly of business, partly of pleasure, for his works were attracting considerable attention on the other side. He scribbled the address upon a card.

"Write to me there," he said, "and I will keep any appointment you may like to make. Only tell me, Clare, you don't believe me the thief that once you thought me?"

"Oh, no, no!" she said. "Ask me nothing now, I will tell you everything when next we meet. But, Ronald, you have given me somebody else's card. This says "Harvey Bligh." Why, that's the new man whose work has caught on so wonderfully. Do you know him, are you in his line? You always had a hankering that way!"

"I am Harvey Bligh," he said simply, without boasting, and yet not without a kind of simple, honest pride that he had made honoured and well known the name he had chosen—yes, even better known than that it was his right by blood to bear.

And so they went their ways. He wondering what strange message she had to tell, she exulting in her heart that the means of avenging herself upon the man who had wronged her and of righting the brother he had so cruelly betrayed were at last within her power.

As she hurried along, she looked up, her eyes encountered the gaze of the very man against whom she plotted that revenge. Yes! there he sat in an open carriage drawn by a pair of horses, and facing him, beside her father, sat the Hon. Madeleine Lorraine, radiant in the sunshine of her twenty summers.

Clare's heart writhed in the anguish of a woman's jealousy as she gazed upon the rival whose loveliness, whose wealth, and whose prospective coronet had won from her the heart to win which she had lost so much.

And the tempest in Clare Armitage's heart swelled and whirled into a cyclone. She felt she could have sprung there from the pavement across the open street and, pointing an accusing hand at Eric Geldart, charged him then and there with all his perfidy—perfidy to her, requiting with brutality all she had risked and dared for him, perfidy to his own blood brother, whom he would without a scruple have relegated to a prison cell, perfidy to his dead father. Yes! she felt she could have screamed all this into his ear there in the open street.

A moment and the carriage had rattled past, its wheels splashing Clare as though in token of the scorn of Eric Geldart for whom she had dared all, of Eric Geldart, slanderer of his brother, robber of his father, his dead father.

"Oh Heavens!" She clutched at her heart with her hands, for there for a moment in the busy crowd that came and went,

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her eyes rested for a moment upon the image of one she thought she recognised; but the face and the eyes seemed to her to be those of the dead!

* * *

Mr. Horace Springle that night returned to Bloomsbury Square with so portentous an air that Arethusa, taking up his hot water, was constrained to inquire if anything "'ad 'appened," the inquiry being met by a chilling recommendation to mind her own business and remember her position. Descending towards the dining-room he was met on the landing by Mrs. Skimper with palpably a bill in her hand and a deadly determination in her eyes.

"Mr. Springle, sir," the good lady observed with asperity. "I am sorry to be imperative, but there is a little matter which I must have an understanding about, once for all."

"Really, Mrs. Skimper," Horace replied airily. "Yes, and, by the bye, before we go into that, there's another matter, perhaps of less importance, that I should like to dispose of first, one of those matters I never like to keep hanging about."

"Indeed, Mr. Springle, and what may be the nature of the matter?"

"Oh, it's merely your little account. Perhaps you'll kindly have it made out and let me have it receipted with the change out of this"—and, with the air of a Midas, Mr. Springle handed his hostess one of his newly acquired five-pound notes.

Mrs. Skimper gasped, clutched at the bannisters to save herself from falling, then, gazing at Springle's five pound note with open eyes, she stammered, meanwhile surreptitiously thrusting the slip of paper in her other hand into her pocket.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Springle. What I was going to say was—dear me! I've almost forgotten what I was going to say. Oh, let me see. I remember. I was going to ask whether it would be convenient for you to have the ceiling of your room whitewashed, only, of course, your anxiety about your account quite drove it out of my head. I'll have it made out certainly this evening, it won't take long," which remark she made with perfect confidence in the knowledge that it was in her pocket.

Mr. Springle, entering the dining-room, nodded jauntily to Miss Amaranth, somewhat casually to Mr. Grimmage, glared at Mr. Dodgerson, who was glaring at him, and there directly opposite him sat the man of all others with whom he desired to come in contact—Harvey Bligh.

Ronald for his part was too much occupied with his own reflections to observe Springle's start of surprise. He had returned to Bloomsbury Square for the purpose of gathering together such of his traps as he would require during the projected sea trip and make arrangements for the storage of the rest, for which purpose he had arranged to pitch his tent in Bloomsbury Square for some few days.

That start, however, was not lost on Miss Amaranth nor on the rest of the company.

"We are honoured to-night," said that lady in her most gushing tones, "with the company of a celebrity."

"Quite right," said Springle. "Been away, Mr. Bligh? Seaside? No! Moors? No! Ah! it's nice to be you, pitching your tent and striking it at will, and no being late at the office because other people are late with your breakfast," and he winked at Grimmage and the rest, while Mrs. Skimper coloured to the hue of her cherry ribbons.

Ronald on this occasion experienced two surprises. Firstly, Mr. Springle was uncommonly polite; secondly, he was more than usually inquisitive.

Not that he plied the usual questions addressed to the successful man in any particular branch of art or literature, as to how he did it, what made him think of those sensational scenes, that sparkling dialogue, what suggested that magnificent picture, or such and such a haunting melody. Were the people in his book or play really taken from life?

On the contrary, Mr. Springle's apparently casual inquiries appertained to Mr. Harvey Bligh's personal movements, antecedents, and projects.

How long was he remaining at Mrs. Skimper's? What were his movements after leaving there? Where had he been during his absence? Indeed, the pertinacity of his questions might have struck Ronald as peculiar, but that his thoughts were far away, and the answers he returned were vague and absent-minded.

For his mind was full of Madeleine. Ever since they parted he had been wondering would they meet again, and where, and how, and would she be as cold to him as when they parted?

Then he thought of that strange haphazard meeting with Clare Armitage, and of her wild words. What did it all mean? Why had she so suddenly, albeit so late in the day, veered round to a belief in his innocence?

He remembered how she had been when first the appalling accusation was hurled at him by his father that he had robbed him, and he, Ronald, appalled by the very horror of the thing, had flown first to Clare, who had always been to him and Eric so like a sister, for solace, for sympathy, and for advice. Even now her words rang in his ear.

"You say this accusation wrings your very heart. Do you imagine it causes less anguish to your accuser? If, as you say, you are innocent, all you have to do is to disprove it."

Yes, that was all he had to do, disprove that base and baseless charge. But, groundless as that accusation was, that was just what he could not do—disprove it. And now that his accuser had died, believing that awful charge well founded, to Ronald it seemed almost as if it did not matter as to the rest.

"Be thou chaste as ice, pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny."

He knew himself that he was innocent. It was too late now to convince him, whose esteem he valued most, of the truth. As for the others, let them go! So that for the remainder of the evening the company at Mrs. Skimper's found Harvey Bligh peculiarly preoccupied, and with charming generosity attributed his taciturnity to superciliousness, self-consciousness, swelled head, and other kindred causes.

When after dinner he left the house, they expressed themselves accordingly with volubility, declaring that success had spoilt him and that the room of that conceited, overrated scribbler was preferable to his company. The one exception was Miss Amaranth at the piano, who pensively reflected that there was no one to turn over her music in the absence of the one real gentleman she had ever met at Mrs. Skimper's.

And just after he had left the postman brought, with others, a letter addressed in a feminine hand to Harvey Bligh, Esq. It happened no one else was in the hall and Springle, quietly slipping it into his pocket, took it with him to his room, then rang for hot water.

"And when I say hot, Arethusa," he said sharply, "I don't mean tepid, I don't mean lukewarm, I mean H-O-T—hot!"

"Like his own temper," murmured Arethusa, descending the stairs. "He's been and paid his bill, that's what he's done; he always gives hisself these airs. What's he want shaving water twice in one evening for?"

Nevertheless, she took him up the hot water and Mr. Springle, lifting the lid, placed Harvey Bligh's letter over the steam, and, assisted by its persuasive power, unfastened the envelope. This done he read as follows:

"My Dear Ronnie,—*Since seeing you this morning my brain has been in a whirl. It is late in the day for the wrong that has been done you to be repaired; still, it is never too late to mend. Give me an appointment at some quiet hour in some quiet place, and I will tell you that which will lift the shadow from your life.*—*Yours,* Clare Armitage."

Mr. Springle, having noted its contents, reclosed the letter, descended the stairs in his coat and hat, stealthily replaced that letter in the rack, and in a moment he was whistling for a cab at the hall door.

"Why, whatever's the matter with Springle?" growled Mr. Grimmage. "Has he come into money? He was as cool as a cucumber to old Mother Skimper at dinner, and just now when I asked if he would make one at a game of

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whist, said he'd got an important appointment—at the Mogul, I suppose, or the Oxford, or the Royal."

"I suppose so," replied Mr. Dodgerson, who at times had strange lapses out of his deafness, "there he is whistling for a hansom," and moving to the hall door, he gently opened it a trifle ajar, then a moment later he turned to Grimmage, asking: "Did you hear where he told him to drive to?"

"Well, if you didn't," growled Grimmage, "how can you expect I did?"

"But I did," answered Dodgerson, "he told the man to drive to the House of Commons, and to drive like blazes, and it's my belief that Springle's coming into money."

Meantime Mr. Springle, almost as inflated with importance as the frog who emulated the ox, whizzed along in a hansom towards the House of Commons, and, making his way to the outer lobby, asked loftily and sufficiently audibly for all bystanders to hear, for his card to be taken immediately to Mr. Eric Geldart.

A few minutes later Mr. Springle swelled more than ever with importance when the member for Little Claverton, hastening along the corridor, greeted him with an effusive handshake and a "Hallo, old chap, how do you do? What has brought you here?"

"News," whispered Springle, "important news."

"What! Already?"

"Yes, only, Mr. Geldart, do you think there's any chance of my running up against old Scrimshaw?"

"Not the slightest: he left the House after the last division. I heard him asking one of the Whips if he'd be wanted any more."

"Ah, gone to his flat to sit up all night over those mysterious calculations he's been grinding at lately, or perhaps gone back to the City to work at 'em with Old Mystery, who seems to live in that little office over ours."

"Very possibly, very possibly," said Eric impatiently, "but, Springle, your news—your news, what have you ascertained?"

"Well, I've seen him."

"Seen whom—not my—my—the man of whom we spoke?"

"Yes, yes, your friend, Mr. Harvey Bligh. He was at our place to-night."

They went into the library, seeking a quiet corner.

"By Jove, Springle," said Eric, "you're a smart man. I knew your calibre when I asked you to take up this little business. Have you anything else to report?"

"I should think I have," said Springle. "Are all these people M.P.'s? They don't look very imposing."

"Yes, yes, but what else have you to tell me?"

"He's received a letter this very evening."

"Do you know from whom?"

"Oh, yes. By the bye, before I go you might get me into the Strangers' Gallery."

"Certainly, certainly, only about the letter, a letter from whom?"

"Why, from the very party you told me to get Varney's to shadow."

"What, from Clare Armitage?"

"That's her, only I'm not quite certain she hasn't put the wrong letter in his envelope, because she commences it: 'My dear Ronnie,'" and then Mr. Springle went on to read his note of the contents of that letter. "Why, Mr. Geldart, ain't you well?" for over Eric's face had stolen a ghastly pallor. The man he had wronged and the woman he had wronged were approaching each other, might soon be joining hands and planning their revenge and his destruction.

"Oh, it's nothing, nothing," he said, wiping the cold drops from his brow, "a little faintness, I've been rather overworked lately. Look here, Springle, you've done your work well, and I'll reward you well. There's one other item of information I want you to get me. Find out and let me know at once by telegram, telephone, anyway as quickly as possible, when and where those two are going to meet?"

Mr. Springle promised and was further honoured by being accompanied by the hon. member to the members' own buffet, and there being regaled by the hon. member with a Scotch-and-soda and a cigar, after which the hon. member, having obtained for him a seat in the Strangers' Gallery, Mr. Springle listened to a debate drearier than any at which he had ever assisted at any public-house discussion in the Metropolis.

TWENTY-SECOND CHAPTER.

The System Is Put into Force.

THE bond between Sampson Scrimshaw and Old Mystery grew closer and stronger, greatly to the mystification of the extensive clerical staff of the Cosmopolitan Trust and Exchange Limited, who were puzzled to account for the continual telephonic and speaking-tube communication between their managing director's private room and the quiet, dreary little room upstairs, the sheaves of papers covered with armies of figures, the often continual clatter up and down the staircase of messengers with cablegrams for Old Mystery, and the intermittent and protracted visits of Scrimshaw to the office upstairs, followed by, on his return, periods of bustle in the first and ground floor offices, taxing the energies of the staff, and driving Mr. Springle to the verge of distraction.

For the system was booming. Scrimshaw's scepticism with regard to it was quite broken down, and, like most sceptics when converted, he had become a bigot. But it had stood the severest tests, had been proved and as its scope of operations had expanded, so also had the success of its result.

Scrimshaw, who had regarded himself a past master of finance, freely confessed that in Old Mystery, the weird, lonely old man in the little room upstairs, he had met one to whom he was but as a little child battling with rudiments.

But only to himself he confessed it, for he was loyal to his partner in the system and to the system itself, which could not have succeeded but for the observance of that first and last condition.

And as their operations expanded, so the Stock Markets began to experience strange unaccountable waves, which at times played havoc with the ordinary routine of business.

For it was part of the principle of this complex system to buy for certain rises, to sell for certain falls, and, strangely enough, to sell for certain other falls, and to buy for certain other rises; in fact, financial juggling entered largely into the scheme.

So that it happened that every now and then the market was mystified by unexpected, undreamt-of slumps, unaccountable for by the ordinary logic of business; or now and then a boom which, according to sound calculation, never ought to have happened, staggered Capel Court, and for hours kept Throgmorton Street in a whirl.

And meantime Scrimshaw was amassing a pile that he found absolutely ponderous, garnering wealth, the weight of which oppressed him. His donations staggered the world, Brixwell blessed the hour that it elected him, and wondered how it could even for a moment have hesitated.

Nearly every issue of a Society paper recorded some princely gift or purchase by him. His yachts, his horses, his motor-cars, were the theme of awe-stricken wonderment, and even American millionaires drew in their horns at Christie, Manson, and Wood's, Sotheby's, and Quaritch's, when his agent began to bid in earnest.

Duchesses in difficulties, impecunious peers, statesmen, artists, divines, besought his counsel as to their investments, but as a rule to these supplications he was deaf and adamant.

"I don't mind buying up your charity bazaar. I'll give you a peal of bells for your church tower, a new tower for your peal of bells, a new church for your new tower, if you like, but advice is a line I don't trade in. It's an article I've never been partial to taking, that's why I'm where I am. It's always seemed to me a sort of morphia, people who have used themselves to taking it get into a way of not being able to do without it, and are generally the worse for it."

Occasionally, however, he would relax this rule and tell some struggling, almost despairing man that such and such a stock would be good to buy and hold till such and such a time, or would give a friend a warning that unless he wanted to

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lose his capital he had best get out of certain securities without delay, or as when he said to Jack Widdicombe:

"Look here, I'm very pleased with the way you've engineered *The Meteor*. I'm going to show my appreciation in a tangible shape. Now, Widdicombe, if I were to give you a cheque for a thousand pounds by way of bonus what would you say?"

"I should say," replied Cousin Jack, "that I'd been well paid for what I've done, and while I shouldn't be fool enough to refuse it; I should consider it an unearned increment."

"Precisely," said Scrimshaw, "and unearned increments are not to be encouraged, so I sha'n't give you that thousand pounds, Jack. But I'm going to hand you scrip of the face value of two hundred and fifty pounds in Golden Slippers Ordinary," whereupon Scrimshaw handed his trusty lieutenant two hundred shares in a mine which two months later was paying a dividend of two hundred per cent. its shares being absolutely unpurchasable for love or money.

And in another instance, when sending Phyllis Daventry upon her annual holiday he handed her with her salary a share transfer with the remark: "Now, don't sell these, my dear, but lock them up for just about three months and then you will have a little by you to make a comfortable marriage portion," which, as Phyllis with indignant blushes said to Mr. Widdicombe afterwards, was absurd, as she never meant to marry, but to be a little old maid with a tortoise-shell cat singing on the hearth, a canary singing in the window, a bright brass kettle singing on the fire.

"And you'll let me call sometimes for a cup of tea?" said Cousin Jack, who was thinking how delightful it would be if he, too, had a canary singing in the window, a tabby or a tortoiseshell cat singing on the hearth, a bright brass kettle singing on the grate, and a bright little body singing at the piano across the room, for Cousin Jack was getting dreamy.

It is not to be imagined that Mr. Scrimshaw's gains were made without entailing other people's losses; that is not the Market's way.

The gigantic deals, the sudden coups, the swift unloading or hauling in of a stock at this price or that, these operations that meant fortunes to Scrimshaw and Old Mystery were fraught with disaster to others, since in the Share Market, as elsewhere, omelettes are not made without breaking eggs.

Many an unfortunate broker, misled by the temporary turn the wave had taken, had unloaded his stock just too late, and as a consequence been incontinently hammered.

Well in the swim of those to whom Scrimshaw's and Old Mystery's successful coups had meant disaster were Eric Geldart and his partner Blagdon, who, thinking the time was ripe to get rich in a hurry, had plunged well out of their depth.

And so well Scrimshaw and Old Mystery kept their secret and manipulated their financial operations that though the financial world was convinced that some deep laid and subtle movement was afloat, no one in the world could identify the movers.

All kinds of rumours were abroad, connecting all kinds of public people with the mysterious influence that one day bulled a stock apparently below par to a startling premium, and perhaps the next beared another till its holders, unloading in panic, threw it on the market at any price, on which occasions Old Mystery was exceptionally busy and Scrimshaw seemed to live with his ear and mouth glued to the telephone.

Russian princes, great financial houses, a certain South African potentate, an uncertain ex-Cabinet minister, a great lady in Society, a talented actress, whose face was not her only fortune and who had a genius for figures, an eminent boat-building bacon curer—these, and a hundred others were guessed at as prime movers in the movement.

But so closely was the secret kept, that Scrimshaw's own clients, hastening to him with the above and other rumours, intrusted him with various commissions, avowedly based upon anticipation of the next move of the unknown wizards.

Eric Geldart, hastening into the offices of the Cosmopolitan Trust and Exchange Limited, mysteriously, agitatedly, almost breathlessly, said:

"Look here, Scrimshaw, I must have another slap at Westralians."

"Ah?"

"Yes, Kenilworths will touch ten before the week's out; Lynton and I have decided to buy for the rise."

"But Lord Lynton's account shows a very heavy balance against him; and yours—um!"

"Yes, but, my dear fellow, this is bound to come off, I've got it straight from the stable by a side wind, that confounded mysterious syndicate is going to bull the stock for all its worth."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, a man told me at the Duchess of Shropshire's last night; he had it from Anastasia Amburgris—she's Prince Paul Stanislaus' friend, you know. It's right as rain."

Mr. Scrimshaw booked the transaction with an imperturbable countenance, and various others from time to time, sometimes in his office in the City, and others in the dining or smoke room of the House of Commons, with the result that ere long when Eric faced Scrimshaw he flinched.

Old Mystery and Scrimshaw sat together one night in the little office upstairs counting up their gains upon the day, upon the week, upon the month, upon the System.

"Why!" exclaimed Scrimshaw, laying down his pen with a sigh of astonishment, almost of bewilderment, "Old Mystery, this beats Monte Cristo hollow!"

"Yes," said the other, "only this is fact, the other was fiction. What do you think of the System now?"

"I think it's only a question of time for us, by rigidly adhering to it, to garner in the wealth of all the world."

"Given time it would be bound to, but for other things—the revolutions and the riots that would be born of the panics it would cause, even practised upon our narrow scale."

"Narrow scale!" exclaimed the other, looking at the row of eight figures representing his share of the net gain. But Old Mystery went on thoughtfully:

"Yes, narrow scale; for supposing we had begun where we are leaving off, not a house in Europe but must have gone, scarcely a throne or state whose credit would not have been shaken. Only last week Paris was mad with panic, laying it all at the door of the Jews and Dreyfusards."

"It's playing the dickens with a lot of people," said Scrimshaw sententiously; "a lot of my clients, little guessing I've been working the oracle, have been telling me the croppers they've come. There's old Viscount Lynton in despair."

"Why, he ought to be jubilant, the Pneumatic Intacto has boomed like a Yankee show."

"True, but my lord couldn't afford to wait. His one pound shares went up to three, and he got smitten with some wild-cat scheme young Geldart and that jelly-bag of a partner of his were keen upon."

"Jelly-bag is good!" grunted Old Mystery.

"Geldart brought the thing along to me; but I didn't see it, it clashed with a concern of my own, though I didn't tell him so, and I was bound to strangle it, which I did, though no one guessed I had a hand in it."

"So all the money Lynton made with you he dropped in the other affair?"

"Yes, and a bit more, and now he's tearing his hair and vowing that one thing only can save him from bankruptcy."

"And that is?" the other asked, with a quick gleam in the eyes sunk like caverns beneath his bushy brows.

"His daughter consenting to bar the entail and bringing her own money to the rescue."

"And she?"

"She's willing enough, but it's a question whether it can be done, whether the dead hand doesn't grip the estates too tight; they are the points the lawyers are considering."

"Aha!" Old Mystery chuckled, "the dead hand grips hard sometimes."

"Yes," said the other, "I've another case in point; there's that fellow Geldart, he's got bitten, too, and it makes my flesh

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creep to hear him reviling his dead father for tying up the money so that he couldn't deal with it in a heap."

"And lose it in a heap," chuckled the other.

"Exactly so," Scrimshaw went on, "only it's a bit off after hearing his Nibs distributing prizes and hammering the Fifth Commandment into the Mutual Improvement young men and young women, and his smug references to his ever-lamented father. Yes! and the very tablet he rigged up where the worthy old man's lying, to hear him going for his thick-headed stupidity and crassness. Well, good-night, Old Mystery, I must be off to the House," and Scrimshaw, looking at his watch, hurried to the door.

On opening it suddenly he exclaimed:

"What the dickens are you prowling about here for?"

"I just came up to ask if you wanted me to wait any longer, sir," stuttered Mr. Springle, shambling there on the landing.

"I never told you to wait."

"No, but I thought you might want me, sir."

"You thought! If I thought for certain what I'm almost thinking I'd kick you down those stairs. Mark me, let me catch you prying into my concerns, listening to my conversations, or playing the spy, I'll make you wish you'd never been born. You thought I might want you; nobody in the world wants a thing like you; you're only fit to wear a stand-up collar and to talk skittles to a barmaid across a counter."

"If that's so, perhaps, sir, I'd better look out for something else," said Springle, trying to be brave.

"Just as you like," said the other, fixing him steadily with a gaze before which Springle squirmed, "only before you go remember I'm going to check your petty cash account myself. Now go downstairs, don't let me catch you loitering near this door again."

Springle, white and trembling, obeyed. And Old Mystery, who had hastened to the door, asked: "What does that mean?"

"That some of the petty cash has stuck to his fingers, that's about the size of it," said Scrimshaw.

"Then I should get rid of him," said the other; "there's not much use in a thief."

"I don't know; sometimes they are useful, as for instance when we set one—to catch one."

"Ah!"

"And this fellow is useful in many ways. I know he carries what he thinks are secrets to various of my high-minded clients, who think any trick or dodge is fair against the 'bucket-shop keeper,' and so I take care to myself select the information that is going to leak. When a man plays me false, Old Mystery, I leave no stone unturned to crush him underneath my heel. Good night."

"Good night," Old Mystery replied, and returning to his little office he sat there alone in the silence of the City after hours, intensified rather than broken by the scratching of his pen, the ticking of the clock, the creaking of doors and timbers and the other sounds that seem born of stillness. And he too added up the figures of his gains.

"Just as I always told them!" he soliloquised, "and they believed I was dreaming, mocked and scoffed at me. No doubt, now, deeming me dead and gone they still scoff at what they deemed the excrescence of my disordered brain. How well it happened, after all! They say all's for the best!

"It was a near thing to the horror of all horrors, only a chance that when I woke up I didn't wake to find all dark with tons above me, walled in by wood and hemmed in on every side by bricks and earth, to that and swift suffocation. But as it all turned out I woke in time to learn that those I had believed false were true, that those whom I had believed faithful were false.

"And now haven't I carried it far enough? I've made enough in this second spell of mine to render what I left them to wrangle for, to lie for, to thieve for, a flea-bite. I've proved the System, the system that I dreamt about and worked out all through the old life, I've carried out in the second. Now I am hungering to go back to the first; I want to go back to my boys; I'm hungering to forgive the one and to ask forgiveness of the other."

TWENTY-THIRD CHAPTER.

Ronald Learns the Truth.

With a beating heart, Clare Armitage set forth that night to meet Ronald Geldart and make a clean breast of the story of the wrong she and his brother had wrought him, to lay bare the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; for in her hand she held his letter answering hers:

"*Meet me to-morrow night at ten outside the Sloane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields.* Ronald."

What was it, that vague chill that seemed to strike her like an icy wind, when standing before her glass she fixed on her hat and cloak. What was it that the wind without seemed moaning to the trees? "Don't go! don't go!"

She went out in the busy street, let herself out at the door—the latch had slipped and for a while stayed fixed and sodden as though its will was that she should not go. Out in the streets she hailed an omnibus, the driver took no heed and the conductor shook his head.

"Full up, miss!"

Impatient and annoyed she signalled to a cab that rattled past.

"Got a fare, miss!" he shouted cheerfully.

She walked on; a drab mist was gathering, a bleak east wind was blowing, bearing on its cutting breath an icy sleet that beat her veil against her face, as though to bid her not to go and drive her back! A clock chimed out the hour. Half-past nine and as its clang fell on her ears it seemed to say: "You are too late, go back—too late to go, not too late to turn back, turn back in time!"

But she would go on, she was going to do right, she said, not for the sake of doing right, but of getting quits with one who had done wrong. Not because he had done wrong to him she was going to right, but because he had wronged her, had not kept faith even in wrong doing.

A little child approached her, she had lost her way. Would she help her to find it? The way lay behind and the little child's imploring voice whimpered: "Lady, take me back!" But no, no, she had no time, she pointed the way back to the child, then on she went.

A black cat stalked across her path, almost beneath her feet, so that she almost stumbled over it, and, startled by her cry, it turned and, arching its back, blazed its yellow eyes and spat at her.

Round a sharp bend in the street four men crossed her path, and she, halting, with an icier chill than ever at her heart, saw they carried something on their shoulders, and the covered shell, whether empty or not, seemed to whisper to her: "Don't go—don't go!"

But on—on she went, though life and death both seemed to whisper warning. Shutting her eyes and ears to the reiterated unfavourable omen on she went.

In the Hampstead Road she succeeded in securing a cab at last. Reaching Tottenham Court Road, however, the driver turned to the right, despite her expostulation, and presently the cab's violent eccentric motion, the horse's affrighted behaviour, and the spasmodic jerking of the reins and frequent slashings of the whip, told all too plainly the condition of the driver.

Clare made every effort to prevail upon the man to stop, or, failing that, to attract the attention of passers-by and police.

Presently there came a succession of excited warning shouts, a thudding crash, and Clare was whirled from one corner of the cab to the other, back against the window, expecting any moment to be overturned.

Springing up with the aid of a constable, she scrambled out of the swaying cab, while a number of men secured the head of the prostrate, plunging horse, and another constable, dragging the driver from his seat, took him into custody, exclaiming: "You drunken ruffian, you might have killed that lady!" and Clare, with a shudder, thought of the omens that had met her on the way.

(Another long instalment next week.)

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

A Familiar Flirt.

"I FELL really in love a week or two ago," writes "GERTY," "and thought the young man returned my feeling. We met at a friend's house, and he paid me marked attention. He called several times and took me out. Then he suddenly told me he was going abroad. He did not even say where he was going. He parted quite suddenly, left no address, and did not promise to write. Can you explain this?"

* * * * *

I fear this is a favourite habit with many men. They really like the society of a girl, and are prepared to trifle with her affections so long as it suits them. Then they suddenly break the connection. Why? Well, in many cases because it is impossible for them to go further. Sometimes these men are actually married or engaged. At other times they are just unscrupulous flirts, who like a girl for the moment, but no longer. I am sorry for you, "GERTY," as you are one of too many girls who have been similarly treated by "charming" men.

A Wife Who Is Too Tidy.

"I AM very fond indeed of my husband," writes "LENA," "but he is a very careless man. What do you think? On muddy days he very often comes into the drawing-room without first changing his boots. Then he sometimes sits down on my new chairs or sofa in a dusty coat in which he has been cycling. After he has gone out I have to spend ever so long with the carpet-sweeper and duster before the room is neat and tidy again. What do you advise me to do? I do not want to 'blow him up,' as he is rather quick-tempered."

* * * * *

"LENA" is, of course, quite right in one way. A man certainly ought to cultivate neat habits for drawing-room use, and not enter with muddy boots or dusty clothes. But I rather sympathise with the poor fellow myself for having such a very neat and precise little wife. After all, a man's home should be *home* to him, and when he is there, he should not be always on his "company" manners. A man does not want to be always changing his coats and boots before sitting down in one of his own rooms. My advice to "LENA" is that she should be a little more human. A chair is meant to be sat on, not as an ornament. Supposing your husband did omit to change his cycling coat? The amount of dust left on the chair cannot be enough to seriously injure it. As to the muddy boots question, see that he wipes them properly on coming in. If he is a very busy man who cannot always be changing clothes, I suggest that you should use one room as a "den" for his own use, and another for purely drawing-room purposes. Men, as a rule, hate drawing-rooms, and if there is anywhere else to go, very seldom wish to sit in them. Just think over my advice, "LENA," and see if you cannot take it.

Cousins' Love.

"I AM very much in love with a girl cousin," writes "D. F." "Is it right for me to tell her this, as she is a relation, or is it wrong for a man to marry his cousin?"

* * * * *

Love between relations is not necessarily wrong. Cousins are, as a matter of fact, very often the best friends. But I do not advise a proposal. As a general rule, such marriages are not to be encouraged, though they may, under some circumstances be very happy. I advise you not to say a word for at least a year, when you will know whether or not your cousin is the girl who is necessary for your future happiness.

Sea Side Airs.

"THE girl I am engaged to," writes "FREDERICK," "has just come back from her holidays. Her manner towards me has altered very much. She seems superior, and, to put it plainly, 'puts on side.' They were staying—she and her people—at a smart boarding-house."

* * * * *

Very likely the "side" will not last. The girl has been probably living a little above her ordinary social life for a few weeks, and it has turned her head. When the dark days come on, and she again settles down to humdrum life, she will soon become her old self again. Meanwhile, just be fairly independent yourself, and do not let her think she can snub you as she pleases.

How to Start Courtship.

"IGNORANT" writes: "I have been seeing a young lady home from chapel lately, and now want to start courting in earnest. How should I let her know my intentions? Must I gain her father's consent? It will have to be a long courtship, so I want to know when I should pop the question?"

* * * * *

Don't be in too much of a hurry about the "question." Go on seeing the girl home from chapel, and if you are really fond of her, you will soon find yourself telling her so without wanting to know how to go about it. When you get on more intimate terms, ask her if she feels she could love you as more than a friend. If she agrees, then ask her father's consent to pay her attentions, telling him your prospects, and when you would be in a position to marry.

A Captious Yankee Girl.

"I VERY much admired an American girl I met recently," writes "GUS," "but I cannot quite understand her. She seems to expect a man to be eternally at her beck and call, never thinking of moving herself. She very often says the most biting things to me, should I make a slight blunder in conversation, or fail to turn a remark into a compliment. Can you advise me how to proceed with such a girl?"

* * * * *

You have evidently hit on a "real American girl," from your description. Over in the States, a woman is looked on as an object of worship by most men, and girls are quite used to the kind of treatment your friend seems to demand from you. It is just an international difference, that is all. In Britain men, nowadays, are far more independent, and often selfish, than their American cousins. As to your own case, I certainly do not advise you to become a creature of this fair American. It may be customary in her own country to regard men as glorified light porters, but if I were you, I should politely show her that it is not the view taken in our own land. Be as attentive to her as you would be to the most charming British lady, but not one whit more, and in time she will get to see that the position of the stern sex is not quite the same as in her own country.

Cynthia

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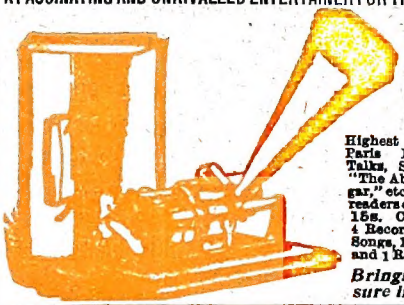

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